

SERVING IS DESERVING

MATTHEW 10:9-20

OCTOBER 4, 1987

Page 1

He was a rich young man, the son of a nobleman. He enjoyed prestige and parties. He wore silk and velvet clothes with a red plume in his hat. In the daytime he worked in his father's business, giving short measure, cheating the customers, making lots of money, and then squandering it at night. He spent the nights partying, drinking wine, singing, serenading and courting his girl friend, Clara. He had quite a reputation as a swinging single. But he wasn't satisfied with his life, nor did he have inner peace. He was in turmoil. His father taught him, "Earn money, get rich, become a nobleman. Only the rich and the nobility deserve to live in the world. Don't be good; once good, you're finished! If someone chips one tooth in your mouth, break his whole jaw in return. Do not try to make people love you; try to make them fear you. Do not forgive, strike!" On the other hand, his mother would say, and softly so his father wouldn't hear, "Be good. Love the poor, the humble, the oppressed. If someone injures you, forgive him!" He struggled with his life style, he struggled with his values, he struggled with his destiny. In desperation he became seriously ill, prayed to God, and found his life turned around.

He heard the scripture we heard today, "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff." Francis who lived in the city of Assisi began his mission, singing and witnessing in the streets where the crowds laughed, ridiculed him and threw stones. His father, very disturbed, tried to take Francis home, and when Francis refused, his father disowned him. "From this time forth, you are no son of mine!" Francis took off his velvet robe and laid it at his father's feet. From that time, Francis had no home. He wore discarded clothing. He ate whatever was given him. He ministered to the poor, preached to the rich, and sang. Once, while on a mission, Francis met an old friend who was quite perplexed to see Francis in such a state.

The friend asked, "Where are you coming from, Francis?"

"From the next world," Francis replied.

"And where are you going?"

"To the next world."

"And why do you sing?"

"To keep from losing my way."

On another occasion, Francis said to his friend and follower, Leo,

"The only joy in this world is to do God's will."

"Why is that?"

"Because what God wants is also what I want. To do the will of God means to do my own most deeply hidden desire."

So Leo asked, "But sometimes we want many things. How do we know which is the will of God?"

That's a good question. With many paths to choose, many courses available, many options open, many decisions to make, and life is far more complicated and complex for us than it was in the 13th century, how do we know the will of God, the doing of which gives us joy, true joy?

Francis replied, "The most difficult; whatever is the most difficult."

St. Francis of Assisi (San Francisco of Assisi) is a model of Christian service and has inspired multitudes throughout history. The world is far different now. Not many of us find it God's will to become wandering hermits,

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Page 2

but Francis' experience and perception are still relevant. True joy comes from serving others. Serving is deserving of your time, your energy, your commitments. You will be hearing a great deal this fall about covenant. Last week we launched a Covenant Group ministry which you may join at any time. In fact, there will be a table on the patio today, and people to talk to you about joining a group where you covenant with one another to meet for a specified time.

A covenant is an agreement, a contract, a pact, a promise, you make with someone else, like a marriage covenant. True joy, discovering and doing your purpose in life, are found in covenant with God. God's part of the covenant is to be your God--the one who saves you, the one who rescues you from the human dilemma of sin and death, the one who sustains you on your journey, the one who calls you into vocation, the one who leads you into eternity. God has promised to be your God, and your part of the covenant is to be God's people. When you become a member of the church, covenant is expressed in practical terms. You are asked to covenant your gifts, prayers, attendance, and service.

Today and next Sunday we are highlighting service. Will you covenant your service? In the spirit of St. Francis, who fulfilled his mission by giving his life in ministry to the poor, will you give service? On the patio today there are exhibits from many community groups which the Committee on Outreach feels are worthy of your time. You may decide today or take a week to think it over, and make a commitment next Sunday. Volunteerism is suffering in our country these days. This nation cannot survive without volunteers. Volunteers provide programs, projects and ministries that the government, or churches, or United Way, could not possibly provide by themselves. There is no way our church could provide ministry without volunteers--volunteers to teach our children, volunteers to lead our youth, volunteers in the office, volunteers to maintain our property. Yesterday morning an impressive group of men pruned our bushes and trimmed our trees. Yesterday afternoon a group of women prepared and served a first-class reception, better than downtown! A church cannot minister without volunteers. And there is no way the community groups exhibiting today can provide their worthwhile, much needed programs without volunteers.

Volunteerism is in trouble these days because increasing numbers of people feel they must be paid for anything they do. Volunteerism is in trouble because people have less time. Even with all the time-saving conveniences, they have less time. I realize that many of you are working long and hard hours. In fact, I am amazed at the number of hours many of you put in your work. You deserve time off. You need rest. But you also need to serve. For the sake of those who need what you can provide, and for the sake of your own spiritual life, for the sake of the covenant you make with God, you need to serve. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no one can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

I'm concerned about the large number of individuals, couples and families who do nothing for anyone other than themselves. They work during the week and play on the weekend. Or, if retired, they feed their faces, go to clubs, take classes, and play. "Doing nothing for nobody!" And then we wonder why our society is bored, why it is restless, why people are trying to fill the

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vacuums in their lives with things. Nothing satisfies your spirit's hunger pangs except God; nothing quenches your spirit's thirst like the Holy Spirit; and God calls you to serve. Do something for someone else. Volunteer, even three hours a week. There is a group that needs your particular talent. Can you imagine the impact if everyone who is relatively healthy volunteered three-four hours a week in a church or community program! I challenge you to give your life in service, as did St. Francis, as did Jesus. Make a commitment to volunteer today or next Sunday.

As you receive Communion this morning, realize the extent to which God goes to be your God; it cost God the life of Jesus, and then ask yourself, "What can I give in return, in gratitude?" One part of your response is to covenant service, to give time. Will you pray, "Lord, I will serve."