

"THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM AT THE BOTTOM"

TEXT: "You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whosoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20: 24-25)

INTRODUCTION One of the sleaziest and most repulsive characters ever to force his oily way through the pages of a book is Sammy Glick, to central subject in Budd Schulberg's novel What Makes Sammy Run. His aim is to reach the top in the movie industry. To this aim he subordinates and manipulates everything else in life. Up, up, up he climbs because, as a friend put it, "He has a genius for looking out for Number One". Sammy runs and runs without let-up because he is filled and pulled by corrosive ambition.

I suspect that the disgust we feel for Sammy Glick grows out of the fact that he ~~mercilessly~~ portrays the worst in our grubbing, clutching, acquisitive society. Sammy openly goes after what we inwardly pursue.

JESUS FOUND SOME OF THIS AMONG HIS DISCIPLES Jesus found some of this among the twelve. He discovered it, unfortunately, just after ~~this~~ solemn announcement that death awaited him in Jerusalem:

out ?
"Beware we are going up to Jerusalem" he said, "and the son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death".

In Matthew's account the incident was triggered by the mother of James and John who pressed in upon Jesus seeking a favor for her sons. As the record has it,

"The mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons and kneeling before him she asked him for something". What she was asking was this, "Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left hand, in your kingdom".

Now the other disciples were indignant when they heard this. In fact, this maneuver of James and John touched off a major flap among the twelve. The ten were angry not because they themselves were pure, but because they had been one-upped, out-foxed. Jesus put an end to their agitation and settled the issue quickly and decisively with words that we need to hear from time to time:

"You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whosoever would be great among you must be your servant."

In the world the goal is domination. In the Kingdom of God, it is service - service alone that counts!

DEVELOPMENT OF THEME In the light of these words of Jesus, the Sammy Glick in all of us stands condemned. In our society it's the cut-throat scramble for maximum self-aggrandizement that both ruins and rules life. If it's money, we want the most. If it's title, we want the best. If it's power, we want self-advancement, self-promotion

want the broadest. We tend to measure a man in our culture by the services he commands, by the people he controls, by the wealth he acquires. We keep driving for the top, turning our fellow-men into competitors enroute. And Jesus stands there within our ulcer-ridden madness telling us that there is room at the bottom for the full unfolding of our humanity in the role of servant.

"It shall not be so among you, but whosoever would be great among you must be your servant".

I think that this is something we should remember when we come to consider the mission of the church. The church is not here to exact tribute from the world - whether the tribute of obedience, or respect, or money, or legal favors - but to be a servant of the world. It would not be inappropriate for us to affix a sign over the central doorway leading into the narthex that bore the words "Servant's Entrance" - for basically this is what we are called to be when we are called as the people of God.

SERVANT OF THE LORD This term, "servant of the Lord" comes to us out of the Old Testament where we find it had different meanings. Sometimes it referred to an individual, sometimes to a remnant, and sometimes to the whole people of Israel. But whatever the particular application in a given instance it is clear that when God calls a people he calls them not to the enjoyment of privilege, but to the exercise of the role of servant in his name.

And St. Paul understood this, for in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, he said:

"For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

Within six weeks we shall usher in the Season of Advent, and once again we shall hear that moving tenor aria from Handel's Messiah proclaiming the theme of the Advent Season. We will sit back and listen comfortably as the words come to us:

"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low"

But when we consider what is being sung in that text we must recognize that a dramatic inversion is being anticipated. The church at its best is always conscious of its role as servant of the little people in the name of a great God. "It shall not be so among you, but whosoever would be great among you must be your servant".

I think we would do well to remember this line when we consider our own individual ministry within the larger framework of the church. There is hardly a limit to what could be achieved in this or any congregation if we had a sufficient number of men and women who were totally indifferent to title, credit or praise. It's surprising, as someone once told me, how much good you can get done in the church if you don't have to worry about who is going to get credit. Tragic, indeed, is the number of worthy causes that have floundered on the rocks because people could not subordinate their desire to rule, to regulate, to dominate, and to receive praise in the interest of the larger good.

GANDHI AND SCHWEITZER The two stellar examples of the servant role in the 20th century to my way of thinking would be Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer. The intriguing thing about Gandhi was that he was basically unpurchaseable. The British time and again sought to reduce the fervor of his words

by offering him one office or another, but Gandhi refused. He was not interested in title, wealth, acclamation or praise. And with a loincloth and a bamboo stick he brought the British Empire to its knees and freed his people from outside domination.

And Albert Schweitzer's theology will long be debated and disputed, but what cannot be debated or disputed or in any way lost is the power of the servant life that he lived in the midst of a rapacious world. At the heart of all that he wrote and said was the belief that he had been sent into this world by God to be a servant. He gave us the term "direct human service". His life's faith surfaces in a newly published book of his sermons called Reverence For Life. In it he says:

"Let the good you do in gratitude match the benefits you have received. Balance the books inside of you, and see if you are paying in full the amount you owe to unknown men and to fate itself. Have you been helped when you were ill? Then know that you have to do something for someone sick. Has someone offered you a loan in time of need? If you know someone in similar straits, assist him in gratitude for the help you have received. Have you turned up somewhere as a stranger and been given hospitality? Now you must do the same for a stranger. Has someone gone on an errand for you or stood up for you? In return, serve someone else in like manner."

"Has a person helped you by giving you the right teaching to achieve something worthwhile? Look around and see if there isn't someone in equal need of you. Have you been given without charge something for which you usually have to pay? Give something for which you would normally expect payment. Has someone taken time for you which he could hardly afford to give? This obligates you to take time for another, even if you are overworked. This is what you must do all your life, in things both great and small. Don't talk about it. It is an item in a ledger only you can or should see, and it is nobody's business. Only be sure that the balance sheet is correct."

In the daily round in which you and I operate within, a society which is fundamentally geared to the press for the top, there are ways in which - if we are sensitive to people, we can pause and perform the servant's role. There is room for this servant role if we can learn to be conscious not only of landscape and seascape, but also of the manscape that we see every day.

THE SERVANT ROLE Harvey Cox in his book, The Secular City, advises us not to try to ~~important~~ into the city the amiability of the rural town. He makes a case for the fact that people in cities are entitled to their privacy. What might be a viable way of meeting people in a small town in Kansas may not be altogether appropriate in the concrete canyons of this city. But there is a difference between loneliness and solitude. Paul Tillich speaks to it quite movingly when he says:

"Language has created the word loneliness to express the pain of being alone, and the word solitude to express the glory of being alone".

SOUL WEATHER IN NYC I was standing on the corner of 86th Street and East End Avenue on Thursday morning waiting for the bus when my eye caught sight of the helicopter flying up and down the East River Drive gathering

information for the motorists who want to know something about weather and driving conditions - which lanes are open, where the break-downs have occurred, where to expect trouble and delays and difficulties.

As I stood there waiting for the bus, I thought in my imagination that in addition to this helpful service, how good it would be if we had an overview of what the soul-weather in our city is like on a given day. Along with the knowledge of where the traffic tie-ups are on the highways of our town, we need some word on the tie-ups of mind and heart that we encounter. Perhaps the report if it were broadcast might go something like this:

"This is Neal Bush in Helicopter 490 reporting to you from over the East River Drive at 79th Street. Heading south.

Fred Benson of the firm Benson, Rogers and Carlson just came on the drive. Bear with him. Things haven't been going well businesswise and family-wise for him for several months. Due to a fracas at home late, late last night, he will be very tense today. Surly at lunch. Treat with patience. Wife and two children are holding up well, but a word of warm encouragement in wife's direction might go a long way.

Susan Thompson and friend just came through the Tunnel and are heading north on center lane. Susan - mid twenties - will be fog bound today, both in class room and out. She teaches in a school in Manhattan. It was two years ago today she gave away her illegitimate child for adoption. Carries a heavy burden with her, especially today. Treat with kindness, sympathy and tenderness.

Father Suggest you give some latitude to nurse Jane Nelson in the New York Hospital today. She is coming over the 59th Street Bridge in her VW. Anticipate a short fuse. Voice likely to be terse. ~~Mother~~ Mother is in Nursing Home. Feelings of ~~guilt and~~ distress and remorse have put her very much on edge. Meet with understanding.

Look for a little storm center at Leo's Restaurant today (coming up IRT) for waitress Perkins who works there is torn apart with inner turmoil because her sixteen year old son was picked up yesterday on a charge of drop possession. Respect her feelings. Her father, widowed, lives with them and he has been drinking too much lately. Quite belligerent attitude in home atmosphere. Stay near, but don't crowd, and don't blow the horn. Will only irritate. Short fuse.

Warning to everyone having business downtown today at the State Registration Office. Clerk Harrison at window seven, low capacity for questions today. Must enter hospital soon for tests. Cancer suspected. If fired on, don't fire back. Anticipate inner tension and turmoil. Will be reflected in work. Don't be in a hurry. Listen.

CLOSING " You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you, but whosoever would be great among you, must be your servant."

"Non ministrari sed ministrare" is the way it was put in Latin - not to be ministered unto, but to minister. The world - points upward and says, "There's room at the top - come, seize it". Jesus stands in the midst of that world and quietly reminds us, "There's room at the bottom, come, serve"

"The Kingdoms of the earth go by
In purpose and in gold;
They rise, they flourish, and they die,
And all their tale is told.

One kingdom only is Divine,
One banner triumphs still,
Its King a servant, and its sign -
A gibbet on a hill"

PRAYER

"O God and Master of us all, help us to put into practice in our daily lives these things that we believe in our better moments and think so sincerely and so seriously. And as we now prepare to leave and go our separate ways, help us so to live that we may be more nearly measured by the character of our Lord and Master, Jesus of Nazareth, who came among us not to be ministered unto, but to minister". In this name we pray. Amen