

THE RIGHT QUESTION

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Philippians 2:1-11
Mark 10:42-45

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In the course of our American democracy, who would even want to count the number of speeches given by various presidential candidates? Most of us are just glad that we are not currently living through the seemingly endless political speeches of a presidential election year. Out of the thousands of speeches that have been given by US Presidents over the years, there really are only a few that remain truly memorable, and quotable. And one of those is the presidential inaugural address in 1961, when John F. Kennedy said these now famous words to the American people, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." In this rather simple and yet memorable statement, JFK challenged individual American Citizens to focus their attention on the needs of the country above their individual needs.

There are those who seem to believe that because we as a country value and promote freedom we can do whatever we want, within the law, without any real consideration for anyone else. But that's not what the founding fathers had in mind. Inherent within the understanding of freedom and citizenship is that of responsibility. As citizens of the United States of America, our freedom does not mean that we do whatever we please, with no regard for others and the bigger picture.

Because our setting in this church is different than JFK's, I'd like to make a couple of adjustments to his memorable words – adjustments that place before us a challenge that is particularly appropriate for those who claim to be citizens of God's kingdom on earth. "Ask not what the church can do for you; ask what you can do for the church."

What would the church of Jesus Christ look like if people first and foremost considered church as a place to use their time, talents and money in service to God's kingdom on earth? What would the church look like if it was not about our own personal preferences and the meeting of our needs, but about that other person in the pew behind us or the one who has not yet even walked through the doors of our church?

Of course, personal needs should be and are met through the church, but what is the purpose for the existence of Christ's Church? Are you here simply to be refueled by God's Spirit so you can get through the week ahead, or have you actually come to offer yourself and engage in ministry in Christ's name? Did you come to worship today expecting the church to do and offer something to you or are you here to see how you can better fulfill God's call upon your life to be a servant after the example of Jesus Christ?

Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) The challenge extended to those first disciples to be servants after the example of Jesus is the same challenge that is extended to us today. As disciples, we believe Jesus has forgiven us and set us free from sin, but not so that we can do whatever we want, whenever we want. Instead, we are set free so that we may follow him. We are set free so that we may better serve God and others. We are set free that we may be faithful citizens of God's kingdom on earth. When Jesus was ready to depart from his disciples following his resurrection, he did not say to them, "Okay, this is it; you are forgiven and off the

hook. Because I took care of all that messy, difficult stuff, don't have to do anything you don't want to do!" That's not even close to what he said. Instead, Jesus said, "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) In other words, you need to continue to do what I did.

The church is not a haven for saints; it is not a club where people come together to simply have a good time with like-minded friends. The church is foremost God's instrument of transformation, and we who call ourselves Christians are foremost servants after the example of Jesus. In fact, serving is so basic to the Christian faith that it simply cannot be ignored – the scriptural evidence alone is overwhelming. But even though it's basic, doesn't mean it comes easily in a society where we are constantly told that we deserve more and bigger things. Going against this mainstream of thought is difficult. And yet, I'm glad to say that selfless, sacrificial service to God and others has not completely disappeared. It may be a little harder to find because it's not often emphasized on commercials or written into the storylines of popular shows, but there are those who take to heart the Apostle Paul's directive in Philippians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." (Phil. 2:5)

About 15 years ago, I met a woman by the name of Janet, a former member of the Chardon United Methodist Church. She was a successful architect, living a comfortable life with her three children, when a trip to Israel in 1994 with other members of the East Ohio Conference led her to hear a new call from God. She sold her house in Chardon and lived off that money for two years as she began working with Palestinian Christians for peace and justice in that very troubled part of the world. She chose a life of service and sacrifice after Jesus' example.

Of course, you don't have to leave the country, this community or even your home to be a servant of the Lord. You can bear witness to a serving spirit without changing your address. I know there are those of you among this congregation who are willing to place the needs of others ahead of your own. There are those of you who are not focused on what the church can do for you, but who are instead focused on what you can do in and through the church in service to others and for the glory of God. In fact, just yesterday several of you devoted a significant amount of your Saturday to preparing, serving and cleaning up after a memorial service luncheon here at the church. Being in ministry to those who are grieving is just one of many ways to be in service in Christ's name through this church.

Very soon, I will recognize a number of you who mostly lead very busy lives, and yet when called upon you said, "Yes, I will serve Jesus Christ through the ministry of this church. I will take some of my energies and abilities and finances, which I could be putting into my work or family or hobbies, and I will put them into Christ's work through the church instead." It's not a coincidence that those who get the most out of a relationship with Jesus Christ and membership in the church are those who invest themselves the most. Those who approach Christ and his church with the question, "What can the Lord and the church do for me?" are inevitably those who end up being the least happy with both the Lord and the church for not meeting their needs. Such individuals often stay at the periphery of church life or stop coming all together because they don't like something, aren't getting what they want out of the relationship, or just can't be bothered in the midst of life's other options.

Over the years, I've talked with individuals who basically told me, "I stopped going to church, because I wasn't getting anything out of it." What I discovered, though, was that most of those individuals had the misconception that church membership is about them being served and satisfied. But standing in direct opposition to this misconception is Jesus Christ, who said, "I have not come to be

served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many." It is that powerful image that continues to compel us to invest our own lives in acts of service and sacrifice.

So today, I hold before you who are citizens of God's Kingdom what I consider to be the right question. In the spirit of Jesus Christ, ask not what the church can do for you; ask what you can do for the church. And may Jesus be seen and God be glorified by your acts of service! Amen.