



Sermon delivered by  
The Rev. Dr. Augustus E. Succop III  
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
February 11, 2018

## "The Perils of Being Helpful" (II Corinthians 4: 3-6)

For today, for Transfiguration Sunday, three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, record Peter's offer to construct dwelling places for Jesus, for Moses, and for the prophet Elijah. When there is agreement among the gospels that is a sign for us to pay attention. What are those dwellings? We are not sure. The word is translated "tent," and those tents could have been a memorial, a way to remember the supernatural event that took place on that high mountaintop, sort like the obelisk on top of Kings Mountain, if you have ever been to Kings Mountain. In one sense, it doesn't matter what Peter meant by those dwellings be it a memorial or a hospitality tent, like they have at the Wells Fargo Championship, especially the one they have at the 17<sup>th</sup> green. What we do know and what is important is this: Peter was seeking to be "helpful." In a moment of supernatural glory, in a moment when it was unmistakably clear that Jesus is the Son of God, Peter pipes up with the offer to be helpful by building, constructing three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

When my parents would host Thanksgiving Dinner for the larger family, one of our aunts would almost always arrive with a willingness to be "helpful." My mother used to dread my aunt's willingness to be "helpful" because her helpfulness always got in mother's way. My aunt's desire to be helpful was like, as my mother once said, was like having a third leg. My aunt wanted to be, hoped to be helpful, but she always ended up getting in the way. Might you also know of people like that? Their intent is sincere but they are really not very helpful. They end up being in the way. The problem with my aunt was that she was a hard-nosed Protestant: she found it hard not to serve. She always had to be doing something.

When we read that Jesus was sent into the world not to be served but to serve, we Protestants and we Presbyterians will often try to turn the tables on the Lord. We want to serve Him, when in fact He has come to serve us. But there's more. Jesus wants us to serve *with* Him, and that brings us to the morning lesson from St. Paul. Paul makes it known that "we do not proclaim ourselves; instead, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as

slaves for Jesus' sake." Which is to say, we are willing to serve *with* Jesus, and only in that spirit, only with that willingness do we discover that Jesus is really serving us.

In many churches, both in Paul's day and in our day, there is resistance to *servanthood*. We are not talking about slavery, be it in ancient times or in modern times. Servanthood and slavery are two entirely separate issues. According to scripture, servanthood has to do with choice, with personal choice. Either we will or we will not serve as Jesus serves, and if we decide to serve *with* Him we end up serving, and doing so willingly, faithfully, obediently, and thus, we become the church of Jesus Christ. No one is forced to serve Jesus Christ, which is why this act of worship is not obligatory for any of us, and our kids need to know that. Here's the distinction: worship is not something you have to do; no one has to worship God. Worship is something we *choose* to do, and if we choose to worship God then our goal is to worship God to the glory and enjoyment of Whom? Not ourselves, not our parents, not our grandparents, not even the people on the far end of the pew. If we choose to worship God, we do it to the glory and enjoyment of God and God alone! *In one sense*, no one cares if we show up on Sunday, not even your pastor. But, there is Someone Who does care. God cares, our Creator cares, our risen Lord cares, the One Who was sent into the world not to be served but to serve; that One cares. Our response to God's outpouring of divine love is that we are willing to serve with, *with* Jesus. We are willing to give up our right to serve as we wish or to serve when we prefer, and we choose to serve *with* Jesus.

And in serving *with* Jesus we avoid the perils of being "helpful." What are those magic words my mother used to hear from my aunt: *Tell me, Ruth, what may I do?* How many Thanksgivings do you have to attend before you know what to do? My aunt could have been quite helpful by keeping her eye on my mother and doing what needed to be done; but time and again she showed up as if it was her first Thanksgiving in our kitchen. Are there helpful people like that in your family? I'm sure there are! And if the truth be known it is best that such people keep their seats so they may be served.

St. Paul's detractors had a hard time believing that belief in the risen Lord included servanthood. They thought Paul was covering up some aspect of the gospel and inserting his own twist, which had to do with servanthood, or as Paul put it, to be a slave for Jesus' sake. A slave is defined as someone who serves at the behest of the one in charge, and you know how it goes. The one in charge says, *Jump!*, and we say, *How high?* In today's culture, the one in charge may say, *Jump!*, but the response might very well be, *Well, let's talk about it. Let's negotiate some other option.* Or even, *Don't you have something more entertaining to*

*offer?* I was talking to someone who attends a big mega-church here in Charlotte, and that person made an interesting comment that took me by surprise. The comment was, *I'm weary of being entertained at church.* I was surprised to hear that; but then again, some people don't know the difference between worship and entertainment, and that our God is worthy of worship, worthy of our praise and our thanksgiving, worthy of our full-hearted expression of *Thank you*, and to hear that *Thank you* at least, *at least* twice a year, once at Easter, once at Christmas.

I think I know this by now, at least I believe this now for where I am in my journey of faith. If you and I choose to serve *with* our risen Lord, if we are willing to put aside being "helpful" and, instead, get in there with our entire heart, then it will be obvious to us how the Lord wants us to serve with Him. I have seen it often, *often* that when we are willing to serve *with* Jesus, we end up where He wants us to be. We don't have to stand around asking what can we do. The Lord nudges us and leads us to where we are needed, and not to serve as some "lone ranger," not as someone at risk of burning out, but as one willing to serve with the One in charge. Make sure this much is clear: Jesus does not abuse those who willingly serve with Him. "Burn-out" is abuse. Hear this: Jesus respects those, honors those, gives thanks for those who choose to serve *with* Him. Matter of fact, let's put it out there as fair-warning: those who show up wanting to be helpful will burn-out, guaranteed. But those who choose to serve *with* Jesus, *with Jesus*, they will have a totally different experience. Scripture puts it this way: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.* Friends, we can't do that if the Lord burns us out!

And here's what you really need to know: for those who choose to serve with Jesus, there is only one item on the agenda. It is tempting to believe that those who serve with Jesus are out feeding the poor and housing the homeless and befriending the stranger, and we do all of that here at Quail Hollow. But according to Paul, those who sign on to serve with Jesus are agreeing to only one thing – to make the God of Jesus Christ known, to let it be known that the God of Jesus Christ does care for the poor and the homeless and the stranger, and because God's cares that much, we care no less. And, thus, God's army of servants, those willing slaves, we are engaged in making God's light shine even in the very darkest places of the world. The goal is to know more and more about this God Who raised Jesus from the dead, and based on what we learn about that God only then do we become the church of Jesus Christ.

So, then, serving with Jesus becomes a learning process. The more we serve with Him, the more we learn about God, about the One Whom Jesus obeyed, and through His

obedience didn't just endure the cross. Jesus died on the cross, which is, by the way, the ultimate form of burn-out. Get this right: Burn-out is not, is not *our* calling. Our calling is to serve *with* Jesus, with the risen Lord. That's our calling, and if we choose Jesus, we will be surprised at how well He takes care of us. How very well He treats those who serve *with* Him.

**Let us pray:** Lord God, the Father of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, protect us from the temptation to be "helpful." Thank You for our many talents, our countless accomplishments; but protect us from being "helpful." Instead, may we offer You an honest faith and an honest willingness to serve *with* Your Son, Jesus, the risen Christ. Amen.