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A PERSONAL WORD FOR YOU from Mack McCarter

“AUDIENCE OR ARMY?”

When the Reverend Samuel M. Shoemaker was preaching at Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City the world listened. Shoemaker was not only one of America’s premier preachers, he was also a prolific author of over thirty books. But he was more, much more. He had the unique quality to couple the capacity for inspiration with the practical ability to mobilize men and women for effective mission. After all, it was in Shoemaker’s congregation that Alcoholics Anonymous was born. And he was the primary author of the famous and wonderful “twelve steps” for AA. He was a force of God wrapped in human skin!

Samuel M. Shoemaker has been one of the leading lights for thousands. He has been for me, too. When he resigned Calvary Church in New York to go to the pulpit of Calvary Episcopal in Pittsburgh in 1952, he hit his new city like a hurricane. He again translated religion into life by mobilizing the faith communities of Pittsburgh into “The Pittsburgh Experiment.” It changed the whole city. And now fifty years later “The Pittsburgh Experiment” which became “Faith In Action” across the land still produces profound and principled community leaders bringing light to dark corners.

Now my point: Sam Shoemaker’s last sermon to his congregation upon his retirement in Pittsburgh was entitled, “Can Our Kind Of Church Change Our Kind Of World?” That is a sermon that has never let me rest! Think of it! Walk that question into the variegated institutions of our society and let it begin its pruning and shaping work after it has critically cut

through all of the blather of our busyness. “Can our kind of business change our kind of world?” “Can our kind of school change our kind of world? Can our kind of city change our kind of world?”

That sermon has dogged my steps like some hound of heaven and it will not let me rest. It points to the salient fact that we are here on planet earth to *do* something of significance beyond ourselves. I believe that we are called to partner with God in the remaking of his world. We are called to be “instruments of peace” as St. Francis put it. We are to be tools to be used in the grand construction of a globe filled with loving human beings dedicated to the preciousness of every single person. Therefore, I believe, *that everything we do must have this point and this plumb-line in place to give us our compass for the journey of life: are we seeking and serving for a new world to be born or are we seeking to be just served?* Ask the question! Things will begin to happen!!

About fifty years before Shoemaker, William James our greatest pragmatic psychologist said at the turn of the century these immortal words, “If we are to change the world, then what we must have is the *moral equivalent of war!*” James knew that if our kind of church or congregation was going to have a chance at changing our kind of world then we must be actively mobilized, efficiently trained, adequately armed, effectively supported, strategically utilized, and willingly sacrificed. Only then could we have a chance to meet the great test for which we were all born: *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Unfortunately we have dithered. We have contented ourselves with being an audience rather than becoming an army. This is nothing new. Every generation has more or less bought into the same subtle drift of thinking that attending “services” is

the *service!* I was stunned to read the words of C.E. Jefferson in his famous Yale Lectures on Preaching, “The Building of The Church,” delivered in 1910. Here is his timeless analysis:

A sharp distinction ought to be made between a church and an audience. It is to be regretted that we have come to rank churches by the size of their nominal membership, and to judge preachers by the number of persons who listen to their sermons. A superficial man is consequently tempted to work, not for a church, but for an audience. An audience, however, is not worth working for. An audience is a set of unrelated people drawn together by a short-lived attraction, an agglomeration of individuals finding themselves together for a brief time. It is a fortuitous concourse of human atoms, scattering as soon as a certain performance is ended. It is a pile of leaves to be blown away by the wind, a handful of sand lacking consistency and cohesion, a number of human filings drawn into position by a pulpit magnet, and which will drop away as soon as the magnet is removed. An audience is a crowd, a church is a family. An audience is a gathering, a church is a fellowship. An audience is a collection, a church is an organism. An audience is a heap of stones, a church is a temple. Preachers are ordained, not to attract an audience, but to build a church. Coarse and ambitious and worldly men, if richly gifted, can draw audiences. Only a disciple of the Lord can build a church.

So how do we move from being just an audience to becoming a forceful army for the building of a new world? The primary reality of our lives must first be recognized unashamedly. And that primary reality is just this: ***We Can't Do It!!*** We are weak, idiotic, blind, and full of a whole menagerie of conflicting urges. As C.S. Lewis said about himself, “I am a whole zoo of lusts.” ***But with that honest recognition everything transformable begins!!***

The profound truth, repeated innumerable times throughout all of history, is that the world has been changed by broken people who were *poor in spirit* (the literal Greek translation: “those who know their need of God”) but who joined with others and therefore became a moldable and molding instrument in the hands of the great Causes of God. What strange truths reside in this realm of the spirit: if you would be *rich*, then you must first be *poor*!

Ken Medema sings:

Who can take a rock, add another rock, then
thousands more of rocks and

Make a mountain?

And Who can take a water’s drop, add another
drop, then millions more of

Drops and make a fountain?

And Who can take a person, a weak a stumbling
person, add hundreds more

Of persons and call them His Bride?

Remember with me this blade sharp insight: God never has called the qualified. But He has always qualified those He has called to be His Army of Love. So who is called? Run quick and look in the closest mirror and you will know. Come On! Join the Army today!!