

“All Things to All People” Isaiah 40:21-31; I Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39; Psalm 147:1-11 2-5-06

Whenever people talk about the Apostle Paul, they dwell on his conversion on the road to Damascus and what it meant to Christianity -- its spread and survival. The old saying “There is nothing like a convert,” certainly fits “Saul” turned into “Paul.” He moved from being a devoted Pharisee and persecutor of the Christians to zealous promoter of the faith. The story in the Book of Acts tells us this happened quite quickly. But it took a few years between his conversion and his first travels with Barnabas,

Paul is often credited with creating the theology of the early and later church. He is also often considered the “Interpreter of Jesus.” So much so, that people often think they are quoting Jesus when they are not. They are, instead, quoting, a man who never knew him yet ardently believed in him and his resurrection. As Paul journeyed about the Mediterranean area, he made no attempt to explain Jesus’ teachings or to prove from his words and deeds that he was the Messiah. His focus was on the salvation that was available to all through the cross.

Sometimes we think of Paul as a man set in his ways, somewhat rigid and always on an urgent journey. He did take three missionary journeys. W.H.C. Frend in his book The Rise of Christianity, wrote, “His letters tell us a great deal about the man. He was vigorous, direct and confident, sometimes arrogant and self-centered. He wrote for the occasion as he felt. . . . and he could be biting and sarcastic as well as humble and pleading; but he was always genuine and utterly devoted to the task in hand which he believed was entrusted to him personally by God.” Frend also notes that Paul was far more comfortable writing a letter to a troubled church than he was in the realm of preaching.

Keeping in mind Paul’s rigidity, this morning’s scripture reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians may catch us a little off guard but it echoes some of the thoughts of Frend. Paul, who established so much of our faith system, told that church in Corinth that he tried to be all things to all people so that he could save more souls for Christ.

Paul did not do this to be deceptive and to avoid being who he was. He did it out of the basis of love and a sense that the Second Coming was right on the doorstep. He believed he had to move as quickly as possible to help more attain the Kingdom of Heaven. He was often at odds with the original disciples, he had been quite rude to them, and spent a lot of his time trying to prove that he was worthy of the title “apostle” and worthy of their trust. Because of his efforts, the message of Christ was opened more fully to Gentiles and pagans as it moved away from being a message for the nation of Israel.

Being all things to all people is a very difficult task and one guaranteed to make even the most balanced person a little unbalanced from time to time. Of course, this depends on one’s goal and the means used to reach it. Being all things to all people demands much of us. Most of all, it requires that we remain flexible throughout our lives. This can be difficult as we become older and more set in our ways. But, if we stop to think about it, we will realize that we already are viewed as many different things by many different people.

When I reflected on my life roles the other day, I was surprised to note the different ways I relate to others and the ways in which I am seen by others. I decided that perhaps it is good the “giftie” does not give us the gift to see ourselves as others see us. I am a Mom to some, a pastor to others, a sister to a few, a friend, a so-called “icon” in the National Association, a sacred relic to some of our younger seminarians, especially the women who have started to approach me in a peculiar way, a brief preacher, a bit of a writer, a kind person, a harsh person, a teacher, someone with immense patience, someone with no patience at all, an inefficient housekeeper, a piler, not a filer, a lover of the ocean or the Great Lakes or even a brook, and admirer of the mountains. There are many facets I reveal to others and many I do not. There are many that have not popped out yet. We all are the same in this. We are all multi-faceted. This is a human quality. And

through it we may be seen to be all things to all people although we might not consciously intend to be.

Paul, never one to concern himself with how he appeared to others, was consciously working on being all things to all people. It was a labor of love. It wasn't just a revelation of his many-faceted self. It was an effort to reach out to others no matter where they were in life and no matter who they were. Because of this, in spite of his abruptness, he appealed to people. He touched them where they lived. By becoming all things to all people he made them feel welcome and accepted. It didn't matter if they were Jew or Greek, free men or slaves, male or female because he believed they all had equal standing in Christ.

This is the challenge that is before us to this day. To consider the equality of all persons in the eyes of God and then to approach them knowing that they are as welcome in the kingdom as we imagine ourselves to be. It really should not concern us how we may appear to others but, more importantly, how we are to others. How we reach out and welcome into the body of Christ all who are seeking a better way to a better life on this earth and in the world that is to come.
Amen

Frend, W.H.C., The Rise of Christianity, 1984, Fortress Press, Great Britain, p. 93.