

All Things to All People  
5 Epiphany, Year B  
February 5, 2012  
I Cor. 9:16-23

One of the goals of a preacher is to take a lesson from scripture and apply it to our lives and the current events going on in the world with words of encouragement or exhortation.

Fr. Ken was telling me the theme he was considering for today, should he be able to preach, would center around rest – Isaiah tells us that waiting for the Lord, renews our strength. Jesus went off in solitude after healing all those who had been brought to him. Today Fr. Ken is demonstrating his sermon to you by staying home resting and healing. This is the first Sunday in almost 10 years that he has missed, while still in town, and you can imagine that bothers him. But he is setting a good example to follow – not to push oneself and try to do everything, even in the midst of illness, but to be able to find those times to rest, preferably before one gets ill, and spend them with the Lord despite the busy-ness of our lives.

As I reflected on the scripture readings for today, my inspiration went a different way. My spirit deeply resonates with this small section from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, especially the phrase: "I have become all things to all people." First a little context:

- Paul wrote to the Corinthians in order to respond to particular moments in the lives of these early churches. He had spent 1 ½ years there previously, and he was responding to a letter his friends had sent.
- In each case, the problems Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians center around the maintenance and nurture of Christian community. He is looking out for the new Christians who were mostly poor and living in the midst of non-Christians immersed in Roman Hellenistic culture.
- And above all else, Paul seeks to connect the gospel of Christ to a particular way of life in the community of faith. This way of life is a life filled with paradoxes:
  - ✚ freedom and servitude
  - ✚ strength and weakness
  - ✚ boasting and humility

All of which are centered on the Gospel of Christ. So let's look at these seemingly contradictory pairs.

Freedom and servitude. The biggest freedom we have is the freedom to choose which God to follow. Do we follow the God of all creation as described in Isaiah: The everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth? Or do we follow the God of self: where we pick and choose what to believe based on what makes us feel good, or what is popular? I imagine the God who created everything would have had no problem creating us as willing slaves, or robots even, to do his every bidding. But we were created with the freedom to choose: the choice to follow God or not. When Paul said "yes" to Jesus, he set out to preach the Gospel. Indeed, in today's reading he said "woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel." At the time of his writing 1<sup>st</sup>

Corinthians, Paul had been in ministry for about 17 years. Preaching the Gospel was a part of who he was. He loved it – there was nothing else for him, no matter the circumstances. For Paul, the Gospel is a blessing to be shared; it is both obligation and reward. And although he was a free man, he said he was a slave to all. The word for slave here is more than someone who was forced into servitude by another – it actually is something along the lines of a bond servant. This is someone who willingly chooses to be in service to their master. This was his choice and desire. This is also our choice.

What causes us to say yes to Jesus? Hopefully we don't have to be blinded and thrown off a donkey like Paul. Usually it is through friends. Friends who have been prompted by the Holy Spirit to reach out and share what Jesus has meant to them. For the truth of the Gospel is embodied and demonstrated in relationships rather than propositions or formulas. We can give only as we are prepared to receive. Every time we share Christ with our friends we receive him back again and know him in a way greater than we knew before.

#### Strength and Weakness.

Paul talks about strength and weakness as though they are at work in him at the same time. How is that so? Paul says very directly, "To the weak I became weak." Paul's weakness stems from living a life of the cross – the emptying of himself and becoming nothing. Here is the touchstone of Christian existence. Paul describes Jesus' life as a self-emptying and calls Christians to embrace this lifestyle. Jesus' living and dying on the cross contradicted both the traditional Jewish messianic expectation and the Greeks' concept of a supernatural savior. It is only Jesus in his utter humanity as a real person who can empty himself and become nothing, that helps us see His divinity. It takes a lot of strength to actually do that; to throw away our selfish desires, to be a bond servant of Christ. But here's the irony – this is where we find great joy. Have you ever had a time when you were talking to others and the Holy Spirit gave you just the right words to speak? Have you ever done something out of character to reach out and help someone you never knew before? This is the emptying of self, of becoming weak to help out the weak. This is living the Christian lifestyle.

#### Boasting and Humility:

Christianity is having a hard time in the world right now, especially in this county. We have a reputation of being arrogant, hateful, and superior. Sadly, some do deserve the scorn the media seems to be giving us. There is a difference between confidence in the Gospel and being boastful and arrogant. I was somewhat isolated from this popular opinion about Christians when two things happened.

1. I was a hockey mom. One day I was watching Eric's practice and some of the mothers were talking about a car in the parking lot with an interesting bumper sticker – it had a Jesus and a Darwin decal on it. You have probably seen that here – that's my car. It makes more sense in Oregon than in California. Oregon was having some bumper sticker wars. First there was the Jesus fish. Then out came the ingenious Darwin critter with legs. Then the Christians fired back with a large Jesus fish devouring a smaller Darwin critter along with the statement: Survival of the fittest. Well – as a Christian and

a biologist that bumper sticker just really irked me because it is wrong on both fronts. The bigger devouring the smaller is not what survival of the fittest means. Fitness in a biological sense is about the ability to reproduce in changing environmental circumstances – not the stronger over the weaker. It is also wrong in a gospel sense because the Jesus I know does not devour the weak ones – he loves them and eats with them. So I put on my car – Jesus loves Darwin. When I explained this to the other moms, their response startled me – they said, “Oh, you’re a good Christian.” Good Christian? What was that, I thought?

2. So my other experience was the same, but different context. This time I was in Jerusalem because Rod had to fly to Israel for work. I know, rough gig, and I got to tag along. The concierge at our hotel thought that I’d like to see Bethlehem, so he had a taxi take me. Well, Bethlehem is actually in Palestinian territory, so my Jewish driver dropped me off and I was picked up by a Palestinian taxi driver. Turns out this guy was a Christian and he asked what kind of Christian I was. I was silent for a long time and I finally said, “I don’t know how to answer that.” He said – “Oh, you’re a good Christian.”

I started to pay attention to what was going on in the wider church to see what these two experiences meant. My eyes were opened. There were many articles I read about business owners who did not like to do business with Christians because they were too demanding. Doctors did not like Christian patients because they felt they did not need to pay their bills. Waiters and waitresses hated Christians because they did not tip very well. There was this sense of entitlement because they were Christians. This blew my mind. We still have this problem today in the wider church, including the Episcopal Church. If ever there was a time for humility this is it.

Being humble is what I think Paul meant by saying he became all things to all people. He took on the identity of Christ and just preached the gospel. He did this by preaching the word in the synagogues and public squares, but he also did this by his life. He did not demand support for his missionary work. He made his own living as a tent maker. Who do you think he sold those tents to? It was mostly to the Roman soldiers. I imagine quite a few became converts because of conversations with him over the weeks it took to make the tent.

But Paul also said to the Jew he became a Jew. To those outside the law (gentiles) he became as one outside the law. This is not about assimilating every religious or cultural practice he ran into. This is about respecting the culture he was in to get to know those he was befriending. He did not make them change their lives to accommodate him. He changed his life to get to know them. And then he explained the gospel to them in their context and in a way they would understand it. He didn’t require them to go to church first and learn all the rules of Christianity – he brought the gospel to them in ways they would understand thereby showing his love for them.

We all do that here. We take the gospel out into our worlds away from St. Stephen’s. We take the gospel into the school districts and classrooms. We take the gospel to Chinese restaurants.

We take the gospel into hospitals, Silicon Valley businesses, to everyone we meet while standing in line at the bank, supermarket or post office.

Oh, I almost forgot – I need to tie the sermon in to current events. The biggest current event is the Super Bowl this afternoon. A couple of years ago, Logan & Julie, and Rod & I went to a 49ers game. The game was good – we won, but what fascinated me was the community gathered pre and post game for the Tailgate parties. What an opportunity – Tailgate Church. I'd get season tickets and to go into their "country" so to speak, set up a tent and grill, get to know them over the season and eventually get an opportunity to talk about God. Wouldn't it be great to have the Bishop come to the tailgate party for a massive confirmation service?? So while all those parties are going on at the Super Bowl, I am hoping there is someone there with the same idea I had of just being there and being open to sharing the Gospel.

The teachings of Christ go against the grain of popular opinion. To live the life whereby we empty ourselves of all selfish desires goes against everything the marketing gurus would have us believe is essential to a successful life. But our efforts of denying self and taking up the cross, of sharing our lives with others and sharing our love of God, brings more joy than anything you can imagine. Wouldn't it be a blast to someday be in a stadium filled with people worshipping God? *Amen.*