



University Christian Church – Austin

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On Becoming All Things

Epiphany 5, b, Feb. 8, 2008

1 Cor. 9:16-23

This morning we are going to delve into the heart of truly Christian community by examining the Apostle Paul's call to us for a deeper commitment to one another, the call to dedicated Christian service.

Now, the word "service" itself brings to mind a story:

One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Alex standing in the foyer of the church staring up at a large plaque. It was covered with names with small American flags mounted on either side of it.

The seven year old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside the little boy, and said quietly, "Good morning Alex."

"Good morning Pastor," he replied, still focused on the plaque.

"Pastor, what is this?" he asked the pastor.

The pastor said, "Well, son, it's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service."

Soberly, they just stood together, staring at the large plaque. Finally, little Alex's voice, barely audible and trembling with fear, asked, "Which service, the 8:00 or the 10:30?"

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I'm a big fan of the Apostle Paul and his call to Christian service, to evangelism, and to cherishing the Christian community. It is fashionable these days to look down on him because some of his directions to the fledgling Christian communities he founded in those early, heady days of the Christian faith, don't fit well in 21st century America. True enough, but I'm a fan of Paul's anyway, because the basic principles that he not only preached, but also lived out, seem so consistent with Jesus' teaching and living, and the both of them are so challenging to us and our ways.

A prime example is our reading this morning from 1 Cor. 9. But to get the full effect this passage, we need to set it in its context. The struggling small Christian community in the great sin city of Corinth, Greece had a great deal of what we might call "spiritual environmental challenges" to face. Corinth was a port city, a crossroads in that part of the world that celebrated every conceivable vice and was renowned as a traveler's place to really let oneself go. Gambling was everywhere. Wine flowed freely day and night. Violence of various sorts was the norm not the exception. And visible from the teeming city streets, high up on the hill was the pagan Temple where temple prostitutes welcomed visitors and locals alike.

As you might expect, many of the Christians living there in Corinth had steeled themselves against the lasciviousness of the general culture by developing

protective morays that they hoped would keep themselves pure despite the moral decay that surrounded them. To make matters more difficult for these - as Paul calls them - “weak” Christians, those who would be harmed by violating their consciences if they participated in some activities related to the pagan culture, there were other members of the Corinthian Christian community who had latched on to that “freedom in Jesus Christ” motif – that Paul broadcast powerfully and were using that as a license for all kinds of things that made the conservative Christians upset.

For example, the liberated Christians said “Idols are no real gods,” so what possible harm is there in eating meat that had been sacrificed in the pagan temple to those idols? As verse 8 of Chapter 8 puts it, "Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do."

To these “strong” of conscience Christians Paul warns they dare not harm their “weak” sisters and brothers by exercising their precious “freedom in Christ.” In fact, Paul concludes chapter 8 by saying, “Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

Here is a powerful and self-denying principle, that if it need be in order to serve the best interests of my sisters and brothers in Christ, whose salvation is so important, those who are free in Christ from the demands of a strict morality code - the strong in conscience- should be ready like Paul is, to set aside that very freedom that is so dear, in order to do the truly loving thing, “if food [sacrificed to idols] is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat.” And in making that commitment, Paul teaches again that the truth of the Gospel is embodied and demonstrated in relationships rather than propositions or formulas.

It is the momentum of this teaching that carries us into Chapter 9 where that same self-sacrificial theme is expressed in a broader scope:

19 “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”

This is a high and difficult calling Paul offers us as the path of Christian living! “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” Does it mean that Paul has no integrity?

Does it mean that he is spineless and will bend where ever the prevailing religious wind is blowing?

Does it mean that Paul is trying to become a religious chameleon changing his colors in every new place. The truth is a “yes” and a “no.” His external behavior is going to change but his driving internal aim will never.

In his very essence, Paul is an evangelist bringing the good news of the saving power of Jesus Christ in one's life. He wants everyone to know this news. Paul wants every one to experience this deep inner freedom; this fresh start in life; this powerful purpose & meaning in life that he, Paul, has found. Sharing that Good News is more important to Paul than anything...anything!

Friends, you know the litany of Paul's life: shipwrecks, imprisonment, flogging, snake bites, stoning, being hauled before one authority after the other,

and we could go on. Paul's life from the outside was one torturous day after another, but he would say that on the inside, nobody was more blessed than he was.

And in this total commitment to his ministry, Paul reminds us of the hymn to Jesus that Paul himself records in his letter to the Philippians (2:5)

“5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.”

Jesus was consistently obedient to God's leading. I will be, too, that's what counts, says Paul. It doesn't matter whether I get to live the way I feel entitled by Christ. What matters is that I use my time, my influence, my energy, my freedom to reach people for Jesus Christ in whatever way I can.

As he says in Philippians 1: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” There is no longer a need to protect myself, to make myself look good in the eyes of others. I don't even need to live any longer. I just need preach & teach & witness& live out this good news that I have experienced as long as this earthly life holds out.

In chapter 8 Paul had admonished the strong in conscience not to make the weak stumble in faith. In that quarrel over whether eating meat sacrificed to idols was right or wrong, Paul's answer was, “it doesn't matter.” Paul says the real question is “what is helpful for my brother or my sister. Whatever that is, that's what you should do.”

This is a strange and challenging ethics he propounds. Chapter 9 is focusing on Paul's evangelistic mode of fitting in wherever he is led, but if we think that that let's us off the hook because we aren't evangelists like he is, well, we've missed that point. D.T. Niles, the Indian theologian, says that evangelism is "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." By the grace of God, we have found bread here. That places upon us an obligation to share the good news with others.ⁱ

Tying Chapter 8 in with Chapter 9 there is no way for any of us to escape the challenge that Paul is putting before all Christians.

And we know it. We are the one's who sang aloud beautifully a few minutes ago "Lord, I want to be like Jesus in a my heart."

When we stop and think about it we deep down know that it is every Christian's role to play Andrew going to his brother and saying, "We have found the Messiah," that is, we have found our Leader, the one whom we can follow and in whom we experience the fullness of life as it is meant to be. And as witnesses of that New Life, we will bring our brothers & sisters & coworkers & neighbors an invitation to experience that same joy that we have found!ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Beginning at this point the sermon as delivered veers totally away from what follows.

ⁱⁱ Said in a less pleasant way, St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople at the end of the fourth century, wrote: "Nothing is more useless than a Christian who does not try to save others. . . . I cannot believe in the salvation of anyone who does not work for his neighbor's salvation."