

5 Epiphany Year B
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Trinity Episcopal Church
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All Things to all People

1 Corinthians: 9: 16-23; Mark 1: 29-39

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all... To the Jews I became as a Jew... To those under the law I became as one under the law.... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law... To the weak I became weak... I have become all things to all people...

1 Corinthians 9: 20-23

In this land of rugged individuality, one of the worst insults you can make about someone is to say that he is a “phony,” or that like the proverbial politician, she “tells people only what they want to hear.”

So what are we to make of Paul’s famous assertion to the Christian community of Corinth: “I have become all things to all people?” Does he mean to say that he’s two – faced? That to an orthodox Jew, he piously observes the 612 purity laws from Leviticus? That to the reform Jew, unhappy with rigid and doctrinaire temple religion, he’s a revolutionary reformer? To the Gentile, he thinks most Jewish practice is irrelevant? Doesn’t he stand for anything?

Well, to understand Paul, let’s look at the context – Corinth was a wildly diverse cosmopolitan place, a cultural melting pot for the Ancient Near East. Here lived observant Jews, reform Jews, Gentiles, slaves and free, male and female, a rainbow people from literally “...every tribe, language, people and nation.” So if Paul wanted to win people to Christ, he needed to understand all of these cultures, and to speak each of their languages. He needed to find a way into each and every very different heart.

Because what he had to share was absolutely foreign and revolutionary and scary for all of them, regardless of their culture – the Good News that none of these divisions matter in the eyes of God; that God loved every single person in this melting pot equally; and that God called them to love each other; not compete for cultural or religious or racial or national superiority. Frankly, this sounded ridiculous to Jesus’ audience; and sad to say, Jesus’ ideas about love are just as radical today – including to most Christians.

But Paul saw the path to true freedom in becoming “all things to all people.” As a Christian, he saw every person in a new and different way. “I am free with respect to all,” he said, “I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.”

Confronted with the tremendous diversity of the Body of Christ, Paul saw that God had no favorites, so why on earth should we? Yes, the Jews were God’s “chosen people,” but so were the Gentiles, so were men and women, so were slaves and free, so was every one.

Because the fact is that what joins all of us is our common identity as “beloved children of God,” and what joins us as Christians, is that we’re committed to “loving our neighbors (and our enemies) as ourselves.” The more differently we perceive someone, the more we’re called to love them. “What is it worth,” Jesus asked, “if you love only those who love you?”

Which is why in today's gospel, Jesus makes a bee line directly from the synagogue gates to the gates of the city, where the untouchables lived – the sick, the disabled, those possessed by demons – knowing that to do so would be a scandal to the priests whose company he'd just left.

Which reminds me of a time just after I was ordained. I served in a parish with a wonderful, energetic, wise and very smart Rector, Thomas, 29 years old... who just happened to be gay. On my first day, before I even knew where the bathroom was, Thomas called me in. "*Paul,*" he said, *...when I arrived here, a dozen families left in protest over my sexual orientation. Your first assignment is to bring them all back.*" I found myself tearing up at this extraordinary priest – who, knowing he was hated simply for who he was, responded with such generosity of spirit. And I wondered whether I would ever be able to be so kind. "*Listen,*" he said, *"we all have need of one another – no matter what we believe about each other. Go gather these lost sheep. They'll listen to you in a way they can't right now to me."*

It was a slow and painful process, listening to the fears and even the outright hatred. I found it so painful to hear, so impossible to respond to. So I just sat in each of their homes, visit after visit, prayed with them, and tried to find the words that would penetrate each of their hearts. After a year, eight of the twelve families had returned, each in their own way, some only when I was celebrating the Eucharist, but in the end, they fully embraced Thomas when they finally let themselves get to know him. The next year one other family came back – nine out of twelve lost sheep. The tenth family moved away... probably because I just kept on visiting them... and two simply refused to return my calls. This was an experience that shaped my priesthood forever.

St. Francis once famously said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and only when necessary, use words." We don't bring people to Jesus by giving them some slick sell job, nor by telling people just what they want to hear. No, we win them to Christ by loving them right where they are, by looking so deeply into their hearts, that we see their *common* humanity, their *common* share of God's abundant love.

And we keep loving that bit of the divine within them – with persistence – with hope – that they too will become afflicted with the contagious joy that Christ plants in our own hearts.

I want you to try an experiment this week – to look at your life, your attitudes, your feelings – through the lens of Jesus' love command, starting with the Super Bowl this evening. As you watch sports or the news, or read the paper, or drive through an unfamiliar neighborhood, I want you to notice your first superficial judgements about people – probably how different they seem to you. Then I want you to say, "God loves that person just as much as God loves me. God calls me to love that person the same way." And keep it up, keep doing that over and over, and watch what happens by next Sunday.

That's precisely why God calls us to be "all things to all people," to look beyond the superficial differences of language and culture and race and sexual orientation and political views and economic status – and to love every person we encounter or even hear about on the news – every person – as equally beloved of God. This is how we discover the wideness in God's mercy, by trying our best to first see God's love in ourselves, so that we may then see, in every person, near and far, the beloved child of God that lives within each of them.