

Being All Things to All People

At the cornerstone, outside the Chapel at Huron University College in London, Ontario, where I went to Seminary there is an engraving in Greek which translates to “Woe betide me if I preacheth not the gospel”.

Not completely understanding what it meant...okay, not understanding MOST of what it meant, I was somewhat confused. If this means I must preach the gospel, what happens if I'd rather preach the Hebrew Scripture, the Psalm or the Epistle? This was before I understood that the Gospel was not only the first four books of the Christian Scriptures. The literal translation of the word “gospel”, comes from the Anglo-Saxon term god-spell meaning “good story”, or “good news” or “good telling”.

That made much more sense. That we were given four readings each week and could potentially preach on all, or even none, of them. We didn't have to preach only from those books which we know as the Gospels, written by the communities of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

It's not a secret that I'm not Paul's biggest fan. I find him, at best to be a bit of a braggart. And at worst, I find him to be a misogynistic windbag.

Let me backup a little bit...when I was growing up, I heard my mother say “you can't be all things to all people”. I thought this was her original phrase. It is, in fact, attributed to Joseph Abboud, an American menswear fashion designer and author. He also said “Be well dressed, behave like a gentleman, and keep your shoes shined”. (www.brainyquote.com/authors/joseph-abboud-quotes)

Now, having said all that, let's look at today's reading. Paul is writing to the newly formed Church in Corinth. He can't be with them in person, so he's writing to ensure they are keeping to the path they have chosen. He's writing to give them encouragement.

At first glance, this reading seems to shine Paul in a self-glowing light, how he's talking about “Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.” (1 Corinthians 9.16-23, NRSV) Huh?

He then goes on to talk about being all things to all people. He says

“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, so that I might by any means save some.”

Okay now, my Mam would NOT be best pleased with Paul. Nor, for that matter, would Joseph Abboud. We cannot possibly be all things to all people, can we? More to the fact, should we even TRY to be all things to all people? The easy answer is that we can only be ourselves. That Paul is entirely incorrect in what he is writing and the writing should be disregarded.

EXCEPT THAT, Paul was on to something. You see, Paul, originally called Saul, was a zealot who was vehemently opposed to this new Jesus movement. He had taken it upon himself and to anyone that would listen, that this Jesus movement should be eradicated. He was convinced that Jesus was a fraud, a “shyster”, and Saul would do anything that needed to be done to ensure that Jews remained Jews.

One day Saul was on his way to Damascus one lovely day and there was a sudden, blinding flash of light, which literally left him blinded. Then a vision of Jesus showed up and said, (and I’m paraphrasing), Jeez Saul, knock it off, why are you picking on me? What have I ever done to you? Leave me alone and come to the light. Oh, and a friend of mine will be by soon to pick you up and heal your eyeight. But yeah, Saul, knock it off.”

Saul was sent to Ananias who had been warned of Saul's impending arrival. Ananias took care of Saul and his companions for three days until Saul's vision returned. During those three days Saul experienced a profound moment of repentance. Remember, to repent literally means to turn around, 180 degrees. He refuted everything he had said about Jesus and decided, instead of eradicating the Jesus movement to embrace the Jesus movement.

But you know what they say, once a zealot, always a zealot. So, instead of being Saul to persecutor of Christianity, he became Paul, protector of Christianity. It's not in Paul's vocabulary to do anything small. No half-measures for Paul. He knew, in order to bring people to the Gospel, the "good news" of Jesus and his movement, he would have to meet people where they were.

Paul did something that I call "alongsiding". I don't know if that's a real word, but it is now. He walked with folks, listened to them, then engaged them in what he felt they needed to do to become one of Jesus' own.

Thus, to the gentiles he became a gentile. To the Jews, he became a Jew. To the poor, he became poor. To the powerful, he became powerful. Paul wasn't really trying to be all things to all people; rather, he was meeting folks where they were, in order that they may better hear what he had to say.

It's like wearing a clergy collar. In some circumstances it opens doors, and in others it slams them shut. People judge and make assumptions before you even have an opportunity to open your mouth. It's simply how most of us are. Paul knew this. He knew this because he had lived this.

Now, imagine being one of Saul's followers. You are convinced that this Jesus guy is dangerous and his followers need to be rounded up and silenced. Okay. Then Saul comes back from a business trip and he's no longer Saul, he's Paul and he's a FRIEND of Jesus. Um, say what now? All that stuff you told me before, did you really believe it?" And yes, Saul really did believe what he was doing. He was a zealot. He was, what we would call today, a fanatic. He was all in or not in at all.

So once he changed sides, it didn't change his personality. He was still a fanatic, but now for the other side of the coin...the other side of the argument.

I say this somewhat grudgingly, I admire Paul's conviction. Not that I am a fanatic about anything, well, other than naps.

Paul had to walk back everything he had been teaching. And a zealot surrounded by a bunch of zealots is not likely to change many hearts and minds. But he tried. By the time Saul encountered the vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus had been resurrected for only a few years, the exact date is unknown and unimportant.

What we do know is that there is plenty written down about Saul's conversion to Paul and his subsequent Church planting. He continued in his ministry for another twenty or twenty-five years before he was martyred in Rome for his faith. Scholars debate the actual date and type of death, but as he was martyred, it is likely that he was beheaded.

Paul took it upon himself that, once he had accepted the teachings of Jesus and the Jesus movement, that he would work for the rest of his earthly life to bring as many of the faithful as he could, to know the intimate type of relationship he had with God and moreso with Jesus.

He says, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9.16-23, NRSV) Paul could not be all things to all people, in the way we understand that to be today; but he could and he did "alongside" everyone he encountered. He tried to figure out who they were, what made them tick, so he could appeal to a commonality and thus gain their trust and introduce them to the Jesus movement.

Thus may we take a page out of Paul's book and share our love of God and of Jesus with all we encounter, not so much as a fanatic, but as a member of God's family; as a part of the body of Christ. Not necessarily with our words, but instead, with our actions, our lives and how we govern ourselves.

Sharing the unconditional love that has been given to us without cost or obligation. Not because we have to, but because we want to. Because we choose to. And that, my friends, is the best reason of all!

Thanks be to God!

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican
Fernie, British Columbia

Epiphany 5
1 Corinthians 9.16-23