

Sermon for February 4, 2018

“All Thing to All People”

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Paul was a Hellenized Jew. He was born in the Greek world, a town called Tarsus. He was even a Roman Citizen. But he was born into a Jewish family. Like many minorities in our society, he learned to operate in both his minority culture, Judaism, and the majority culture, the Roman Empire.

As a Hellenized Jew though, he was looked down on by the “real” Jews back in Israel. Because he was raised outside the Promised Land his Jewishness was often suspect. Hellenized Jews were often treated as second class citizens of Judaism. We see this dynamic at work even in the early Church in the book of Acts when the widows of Hellenized Jews thought they were not being treated as well as the widows of local Jews. (Acts 6)

Perhaps Paul overcompensated for this at first. Maybe he had developed a kind of inferiority complex, and that is why he traveled to Jerusalem and studied, and excelled, as a student of Gamaliel. Maybe this overcompensation is what led him to be so zealous in his persecution of the Christians. In a way he was saying, “Look, I am persecuting this group with questionable beliefs because my beliefs are beyond reproach.”

But in the end, we know he had a change of heart. In a crisis moment, Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. And he eventually came to believe in this Jesus whose followers he was imprisoning.

Paul’s history made him a citizen of two cultures. He was at home in both the Jewish world and the Greek world. He spoke both Greek and Hebrew. He was able to transition from one culture to the other seamlessly. He was also able to take a primarily Jewish message and communicate it to the Greek world. He was then able to serve as an ambassador of the growing Gentile church to the Jewish believers. He became a bridge that brought together the Jews and Gentiles who had come to believe in Jesus.

That is where we meet Paul in our lesson today. He is between worlds. He is writing to the Corinthian church that was a conglomeration of Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female. In the previous chapter he has spoken of Love building up. He is headed in the direction of 1 Corinthians 13 where he says that the greatest gift of the Spirit is love. And here is he speaking about this love.

Immediately before the passage we read this morning he talks about his own rights. He says, “I have a right as an apostle and as the founder of these churches to demand certain things.” In verse 15 he says that he has not demanded any of these rights. He also said that he is not asking that these things be given to him now either. He has not given up his rights, but he has simply chosen not to exercise them. He has chosen not to demand the privileges he is entitled to.

Why has he not exercised his rights? Because he has priorities greater than the things he is entitled to. To Paul the message of the Gospel is of paramount importance. He has been entrusted with this good news of God’s love and grace for the whole human race. That is what matters! Out of love, he is willing to forgo the things he is entitled to in order to help others experience the grace and love of God through the Gospel.

That is what he is talking about when he said that he had become all things to all people. In the previous chapter he talks about his willingness to become a vegetarian in order to build up those sensitive about eating meat. Here he speaks of his willingness to be a Jew among Jews and a Gentile among Gentiles in order to help them hear the Gospel. He has humbled himself and put aside his

entitlements in order to bring the Good news to them. He, in love, is willing to go to great lengths to go to where people are to take them the Gospel.

How Methodist of him! That is exactly what John Wesley did. He went to the fields and streets to where the people were to take them the good news of love and forgiveness that had warmed his heart. He went to the coal mines and preached to the men as they changed shifts because that is where they were.

I have heard people say concerning going to lengths to bring people to church, “They know where we are, they can come if they want.” That is an attitude of entitlement not humility. If your friend is sick and you discover a cure wouldn’t you go to your friend and tell them, or would you say, “They know where the doctor’s office is.” You would go to great lengths to bring them to the doctor. Well, there is a world sick for love and grace and forgiveness. We are called to go to them; to meet them where they are and bring them love and grace.

Paul said, “I am all things to all people.” Some might say, “Well, isn’t he just being wishy washy? Why doesn’t he just make up his mind” No, he is being precise about what is important. The Gospel is what matters and what is essential. That message of love and grace is paramount. Things like what food you eat and what days you observe or what language you speak are secondary.

He may know that eating meat is acceptable, and he may prefer to keep the Jewish holidays and practices, but those things are secondary. So, he does not require Gentiles to become Jews to be Christians, he does not required Jews to stop worshiping God the way they do to be Christians. He is willing to meet people where they are, slave or free, male or female. Paul gets a lot of bad press about the male and female thing. But one day when he went to the prime location for worship in the town of Philippi he found a group of women, so he sat down and taught them and one of the Lydia because the host of the church in Philippi. He certainly acted as if he believed that in Christ there is no male or female.

Our Moravian friends say something that John Wesley latched onto. They say, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” I believe “charity” is the old English usage that meant “in all things love.” Being all thing to all people does not mean giving up the essentials which for Paul was the good news of Jesus and God’s love. It does mean showing liberty in the things that are not essential and charity in all things.

“All things to all people.” How do we live that out? Simply, we need to meet people where they are. That’s why our mission efforts in the community are so important. Whether it is the Great Day of Service or helping with the refugee’s English classes and after school program, or boy scouts, or the yard sales, or Interfaith Hospitality Network, or The Transformation Walk or any of the many other mission events we participate in, we need to be in the community meeting people where they are with the needs they have. If people have need for food, clothing, and shelter, we meet them where they are with those needs.

Some people think of mission efforts as a precursor to evangelism. They say, “If we help them, they might come to church.” That’s a self-serving attitude. I think missions is evangelism. By opening our church to Hispanic children learning English, we are proclaiming the love of God in a louder way than any sermon could ever do.

The message of God’s love is what is paramount. Let us, from a focus of love, seek to be all things to all people. Let us go to the world and proclaim that love through our actions. Instead of demanding the thing we are entitled to, let us willingly humble ourselves and lay aside those things so that others may experience God’s love as we have!