

## All Things to All People?

### 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

I was young once and single. And one evening I was on Long Island, attending the graduation party of my friend Adam Sternberg, back in 1974. It was actually supposed to have been a graduation-engagement party, but unfortunately, the intended said no, which sort of put a damper on the party, but I digress. And there I was, talking to a young lady I had just met. And she liked me. We got along fine, and then the talk turned to music. Who is your favorite artist? Neil Diamond. She said, "Me, too." In that moment, the world was suddenly a wonderful place. And then she said, "After the Goldrush, what a great album. My favorite." I said, Um, that's Neil Young. I said, Neil Diamond.

To which she replied, and I quote her response in its entirety "EEEWWWW." And she walked away. Twenty minutes of my life wasted, just like that.

Why tell this sad story? Because of the context of our Scripture: being all things to all people. You see, in this one area, music, I didn't measure up to her expectations, and that was that. She wasn't going to waste her time with someone whose taste in music was so obviously dreadful and deficient. And she cast herself out from my presence.

To belong to her community, one could like Neil Young, but not Neil Diamond. And in the

church at Corinth, there were folks of varied opinions, varied backgrounds, and they were trying to say the others couldn't belong. There were all sorts of dealbreakers, all sorts of reasons why this group or that group couldn't belong. And Paul's response is, "Well, I go at it in a different way. I try to be all things to all people."...That by all possible means I might save some.

All things to all people. What a complicated saying! In normal conversation, we always speak of it in the negative: Marketing guru Jennifer Rice writes, Trying to be all things to all people is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to attracting and keeping customers. ... without focus, you risk a bland, diluted message that means nothing to anyone.

And of course, in politics, among the most heinous of modern political sins is to be known as a flip-flopper.

All things to all people? You can't do it. It's foolish. As foolish as I, a middle-aged man, might look with dreadlocks or pierced eyebrows, so I could relate to the younger folks. Not that there is anything morally wrong or unChristian at all with pierced eyebrows or this hair style or that hair style, it's just that, well, I think I would just look foolish... and more importantly, I'm not sure it would make me any more credible in sharing the gospel with folks who have such styles.

You can't be all things to all people. That's all there is to it. Except. Except.

Paul talks precisely about this: he does try to be all things to all people. But to what extent? Let's

look at the church in Corinth, a seaport town filled with folks from all sorts of backgrounds: Jewish, God-fearers, and Pagans. The God-fearers were non-Jews who nevertheless kept the moral law of the Jews, the Ten Commandments, for instance, but would not be circumcised.

Now, Paul never advocates that we compromise morality in order to reach others for the sake of Christ. In other words, we do not have to steal in order to "relate to" thieves, or do drugs in order to reach the addicted. But at the same time, when he speaks of being all things to all people he is saying at least this much: he puts aside cultural differences, and accommodates himself to folks who have different customs. If invited to a Gentile's house, he will eat bacon, but if he invites a Jewish person to his house, he won't serve bacon, lest that bring offense.

And notice this: when Paul calls himself all things to all people, he is doing so for a specific purpose, and it is not to better himself. It is not to win an election or sell a product or ingratiate himself. NO. His purpose is only to share with others the redeeming love of Jesus Christ.

Jesus once looked a big crowd, and had compassion on them "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." He didn't see them as a bunch of sinners or dirty or outcast, just folk who need a shepherd. I think Paul is intimating a similar attitude when he talks, not just of being all things to all people, but a servant of all... he doesn't exalt himself or think himself better than the others, but rather as a humble servant with the task of sharing Christ's Love.

A 19th Century Clergyman named John Beardsley wrote

*Being all things is to:*

*Be glad with those who are glad,*

*Sad with those who are sad,*

*Uplifting to those who are down,*

*Fulfilling to those who are empty,*

*Wise to those who are ignorant,*

*Discerning to those with no understanding,*

*Give direction to those who are lost,*

*Be a blessing to those chosen to lead,*

*Bold with the truth when others are timid,*

*Demonstrate patience to the impatient,*

*Be there for those who are lonely,*

*Just listen to the ones with burdens,*

*Work together with them needing a helping hand,*

*Provide protection for those who are afraid.*

As Christians we sometimes find this difficult. We sometimes think only folks who think like us, look like us, act like us, are those whom Christ has called into his Kingdom. But Paul was willing to be all things to all people because he believed all people should have a chance.

The least favorite person at my former church was Jane Fonda, because of her support of Hanoi during the Vietnam War, and I was serving right outside the gates of MCAS Cherry Point. I didn't

like her all that much myself. And so I told the folks that they were free to boycott her movies, free to hiss at her if she appeared on a TV screen, but if she ever came to church (not likely of course) I expected her to be made welcome.

Because when Paul is talking about being all things to all people he is perhaps really saying this: "I act Christ-like to all people, even those I don't like, even those whose actions I despise, on the off chance they might come to accept Christ's love for themselves."

Christ's net is a wide one and our calling is an inclusive one. And sometimes a difficult one. There was a man, I call him Shrimp Boat Guy, who scammed me out of some money to fix his shrimp boat, and then came back later to scam me again. I kicked him out of my office, told him never to come back. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me. But I think in just telling him to be gone, I failed Christ.

Christ would have preferred, I think, that I hold him accountable for his actions, yet share with him Christ's love and invite him to Christ's church. Doesn't matter that he probably would have laughed at me. As Paul notes, he is all things to all people in order to save some. Evidently he didn't anticipate overwhelming success in his endeavors, but that's for another sermon.

I wasn't required to become shrimp boat man, or a con artist, but I was required to see in him a being, a person, that Christ could transform.

You know, in the British Army, chaplains do not have ranks. They have grades. And the reason they don't have ranks is so they can become the rank of the one with whom they speak. So they speak always as an equal. Their designation is CF, Chaplain to the Forces. And none are called by rank or grade, but always, Padre.

Never superior, never subordinate, but equal. Something of that in being all things to all people. Realizing prince and pauper alike, drunkard and deacon, military and civilian, tattooed and not, nose-pierced or not, rap devotee or Mozart devotee, we all stand equal in need of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

And all have an equal call to share this love with others. Because we have all received an equal gift, that Christ loved us, even us, while WE were still sinners.

Paul said he tried to be all things to all people that he might save some. No matter whom he saw, he saw someone whose life could be transformed by Christ's redeeming love. And so was bold to make the effort.

Being all things to all people means seeing in the other a person the potential of transformation. And so may we at least try, try to understand, for instance "What must it be like to be an alcoholic? What must it be like to be a single mother? What must it be like to be old and alone? What must it be like to have a body that no longer works? What must it be like to be in this country and know no English? What must it be like to be young, and trying to hold on to your

values when no one else seems to? What must it be like to be trying to raise a family and worry about braces and mortgages and your job?

We are not called to be like one another, or to approve of one another, but we are called to care. We ourselves are given the ministry of being all things to all people, or to be more precisely, to become the presence and compassion of Christ to all people. And as we do, we are again the sort of people that Paul and Christ hoped we might be. Amen.