

**February 7, 2021
St. Matts, Acton, MA**

**“ALL THINGS to ALL PEOPLE?”
I Corinthians 9:16-23**

It's not news to any of you that we are a divided people. Our diversity, uniqueness, variety of gifts – these are God given. But the divisions that we know in these days in our communities, our churches, our country and across our world – these are evidences of our stresses, brokenness, and separateness.

Christian blogger John Pavlovitz writes: our problems aren't simply a matter of us versus them. What we have here is not a liberal problem or a conservative problem: it's a human problem to which we all are susceptible. It's a human tendency to forget to be kind when we feel angry, afraid, misunderstood, misjudged, opposed, or threatened.

This experience of division is present within my own family. Parts of my family have settled on kindness that is a block to speaking openly about certain things for fear of further distance or alienation from one another. The divisions of our time are personal for many of us; they often live close to home, close to our hearts and our relationships.

And so in the midst of all that we're going through, the question is how we can we speak the truth AND be loving and kind with our neighbors? How do we hold this tension? How do we do both?

In our Scripture Lesson this morning, the Apostle Paul seems to have something to say to us in these dangerous and difficult times. The 22nd verse in our passage this morning Paul says that he is all things to all people in sharing Christ's Gospel. All things to all people. I confess to you that my first response is that Paul doesn't understand how bad things really are these days. And I can't tell you how many times I have heard that we CAN'T be all things to all people - meaning that we can't expect to find common ground with everyone or have everyone be happy with us.

This same Paul who claimed to be all things to all people, remember, as Saul, was chief among those who had persecuted the early Christian movement, who had doggedly pursued followers of Jesus, who had supported the killing of Stephen, considered to be the first martyr of the Christian Church.

Paul's later experience with the Risen Christ, however, changed his heart and mind - changed the experience and direction of his entire life. It is not Saul but the transformed

Paul who is saying, about his own ministry, that he does not come from a place of superiority or particular privilege but as a servant. He expects misunderstanding, even opposition. But his approach is to try to make common ground with others, to walk with others in their experiences. To be all things to all people – for the sake of Christ’s Gospel.

St. Francis of Assisi is purported to have written: “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” The saint’s actual words were: “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”

Francis was referring to that tension between what we profess and how we live. The talk and the walk. It’s what Paul was expressing to the Corinthian Church: how do we proclaim/profess what is true about God’s values (love, mercy, justice) – while we not only can’t get along with others who disagree, we aren’t even on speaking terms.

Paul’s approach (all things to all people) sounds good, doesn’t it? But if you’ve ever seriously had an encounter or sought to develop relationship with another whose world view is nowhere near your own, with whom rational arguments find

no common ground – then you know that this is terribly difficult.

Although very much on our minds, this is not first about our current politics or the state of our world. I am not even speaking about our denominational struggles (We are on the cusp of having parts of the church separate. We might have done so by now if not for this pandemic which has kept the denomination from meeting and taking that action).

What Paul is referring to is an experience of deeply understanding others, being able to enter into the experience of another, and be in dialogue if it can get there – even with someone who doesn't trust you, who thinks you're an opponent or worse, who may not have any interest in dialogue or sharing.

Paul's context here is his (preaching) ministry, sharing the life changing, world changing Gospel that he himself experienced dramatically, the Good News of Jesus Christ with folks who don't know of it, who may have other ideas about who God is, who are suspicious or disinterested. Note that even then he hopes to "save some" [v 22]. This is not a triumphalist manifesto, some magic potion, but truth that emerges in humility, grounded in Spirit, with God as a partner in the interaction.

In this context, for us, whether the person we encounter is a political opponent or someone we usually sit next to in church – the essence of the interaction is to see another as Jesus would see them: with love and mercy, with truth and seeking new understanding and new life, with hope and compassion. Seeking to deeply relate to another person, finding common ground.

Dear Siblings in Christ, this is hard. We are all in a very difficult place. With my friends Paul and Francis, I will tell you what I think I know:

>Tell the TRUTH in the ways that we know. Truth about Jesus Christ. With humility. Not partisan talking points. And as St. Francis would say: live the truth that we are called to tell. Build communities of humility and love (not self-righteousness) – so that what we proclaim and live has credibility and authority worthy of our Christ. [Fuerst]

>Find opportunities for “sacred conversations.” Not just with people we know and with whom we agree. Occasions with other children of God who may be very different from us. Occasions to talk the talk about our realities as children of grace, the truth of how our hearts and lives are changed by

Jesus Christ, what that means for our living and serving, our walking and working in the world.

In this, we've got to have faith, be brave and dare that God will help us to find our voices AND find some common ground/common hearts with others.

>Find all the ways we can to express HOPE in the midst of a society that lives in anxiety, uncertainty, despair: "The truth of Jesus...is that God has placed the church in the world 'for such a time as this.'" [Fuerst] The Advent and Epiphany of Jesus was for a broken and hurting world just like ours. Our mission field is all around us. Perhaps even in our own families.

And there are signs all around of hope and new life and new relatedness. Signs of God's Spirit breaking through all the other stuff. Evidences of compassion and peace and justice. Change which honors all God's children and all God's creation. Let us be people who point to these signs of truth and hope and new life. Always.

May God continue to surround you with grace and richly bless you with all the gifts that you need, that we all need, to walk the walk and talk the talk - of truth, of love, of hope - that will change the world.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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