

Feb 8 Adaptability

I Corinthians 9:16-23

I have become all things to all people. This phrase, taken out of context, has come to mean all sorts of things to all sorts of people. One of the ways it has been most abused is using it to justify a system of actions and beliefs called situational ethics. This says there are no moral absolute standards and every event must be weighed on its own merits. This can be boiled down further to the truism, "If it feels good and nobody gets hurt, do it." This is not what Paul was saying.

First, the context of the quote. Paul is describing his adaptability. Paul relates one of the secrets of his evangelistic prowess: He goes to the people, where they are, on their own terms. He does not require that they come to him or that they meet him on his own ground.

To help us understand what Paul is talking about let me introduce you to Matthias. (This is a made up story!) He was the disciple elected to replace Judas. He was a faithful follower of Jesus, lived in Jerusalem and felt that he too was called to be a missionary to Gentiles. He talked to the house church which he led and all were enthusiastic about the plan. All those in the house church were encouraged to invite any Gentiles they met to worship. Well that was a bit of a problem as most of them tried to keep from having any contact with Gentiles. They were, after all, Gentiles. They didn't believe in the one true God, they ate pork for dinner and, I blush to have to mention this, the men were not circumcised. But after a couple of months one of the members happened to be at the local deli when a Gentile merchant from Rome walked in. He was lost and needed directions. This member, remembering their pledge, offered to walk him through the winding streets of Jerusalem to the place he was looking for. The merchant was ever so grateful. Just before getting to the location the man invited him to come to worship at his house church. He was startled when the merchant said yes. He had heard something about this new faith before leaving Rome. It was agreed that they would meet the following day and he would escort the man to church. Upon arriving they asked the merchant if he knew Hebrew. They were a little confused as to what to do when the answer was no. They assured him it would be all right. Just stand and

kneel with the rest and someone would fill him in on what was going on. At the conclusion of the worship they invited him back but let him know that before returning he needed to change his diet, get rid of his household idols and begin a crash course in Hebrew and visit the local rabbi who would handle the issue of circumcision. They apologized that they couldn't deal with it right there because they didn't have the training. They planned to send someone to school to learn how if they got more Gentiles coming to worship. They were all in anticipation the following week expecting their new friend to come back. They were confused when he didn't show up. After a few months they decided that they needed a new goal since converting Gentiles was not going very well. When someone mentioned this guy Paul who was having great success they thought about it and decided that he had to be way too accommodating. So, they went to the leaders of the Jerusalem church asking for a cease and desist order on all of Paul's activities.

Now we laugh at their misguided ways but how are we that much different. Too often we sit here on a Sunday all ready to welcome people and help them grow in the faith. Now we know we are to invite them but the problem is that all of our friends are Christians and already go to church and if they don't go to church they have let us know that they are anti-church and anti-religion and so we decide to not mention that we go to church to them. When someone does show up we expect them to like the music we like, know the Lord's Prayer and be able to find Matthew 5:1 in the Bible. If they were active in a church before moving to Sequim they fit right in. If they are enquiring we just hope that our smiles and hellos are enough to get them past the moments of awkwardness until they learn how we do church and begin to fit in. Usually we never see them again.

We need to do things differently. Paul was successful because he tried to adapt to those around him. Becoming all things to all people without losing your grounding is hard work. It requires you to see what is truly important and what is baggage that has been added on, over the centuries, to your core beliefs. Paul knew all the biblical reasons for circumcision and yet he was willing to discard it because he realized in Jesus' message of love and life, being circumcised or not made no difference. He, as we learned last week, was willing to become a vegetarian because eating meat, any kind of meat, was a problem for some people and what you ate wasn't important to the

Gospel. Paul came to understand what, to him, was central to his faith. He would not budge on these issues but on everything else he was adaptive. The problem is that one's core beliefs are not always someone else's. Paul was hauled before the leaders in Jerusalem because he did not require circumcision as a requirement before baptism into the faith. Some saw this as core and Paul had become wishy washy in his thinking, at least to them. Even to this day, we often argue about peripheral side issues because we want to say they are essential. We see this being played out a lot in the Catholic Church at the moment. Pope Francis ignores a lot of "sacred traditions" because they, to him, get in the way of the Gospel. The conservative hard liners are scandalized. He ignores them and continues doing things his way. So what does this say to us today?

Let us learn from Paul a few things. First he was willing to go meet people where they were and meet them on their own terms. He went where he thought he would find people who might listen to the good news. In reading the Acts of the Apostles, Paul had a very clear strategy. When he came to a new community he first sought out the Jews. He knew that there were many who attended Jewish worship services who were not converts to Judaism. They accepted the idea of one God and lived a moral life but were not willing to embrace all of the other parts of what it meant to be Jewish. In preaching to them he found a group who were searching for meaning. He presented the good news of Jesus with as few rules as possible. When his preaching got him into trouble with the Jewish leaders he would leave the Jewish places of worship and find his own place.

Where are there people who are searching, asking questions, in our community today? These are good people who want to make a difference but don't see church as being the best way to do it. Perhaps they attend your club or are your neighbor down the street. Paul says engage them. Talk with them, don't preach to them, and most of all don't invite them to church, not at the beginning. Build up a friendship. Support them in difficult times. Then when those challenging times come offer the love and help of the church.

Evangelism is about relationships. Paul realized people would not listen to you if you spent most of your time erecting walls or creating hoops that people had to jump

through to be considered faithful. They would reject it. So instead he found them, listened to them and unapologetically let them know of his faith. He didn't preach at them but he also didn't hide his faith. He believed that given time, these relationships would lead to deeper conversations. He was very successful because he was able to help people connect to a God who loves them on their terms.

Part of what we are trying to do here at Trinity is to relearn Paul. In hiring Diana Stoffer as our first Faith-in-Action coordinator she has been tasked with creating relationships. This church relates to many groups and individuals over the period of a month. Our scouts who are with us today are just one example. She will be developing a better line of communication between them and us. Why? Not, and this might surprise you, to get them into seats in worship. Now if that happened we wouldn't object. But instead we want them to know we care about them as individuals. We care about their struggles and their needs. We want to hear their questions and see if there are ways to help. This is where we differ from some groups who are strongly evangelistic but their only goal is to get that individual in the doors of the church.

We believe that the best way for people to learn about the love of God is by finding a community of faith that loves them. From there, who knows what might happen, but that is in God's hands not ours. Reaching out to the community and meeting people where they are, listening and caring is what we are called to do.

Over the year you are going to be given opportunities to engage with our community in new and creative ways. We won't be trying to teach them to follow Jesus the way we have found it to be meaningful but will instead be adapting, listening and growing in grace with them. Think about your friends who do not go to church. Realize that they are your mission field. Not to preach at but to listen to and support. This is how you share God's love. This is what it means to be agents of transformation in a community. It is a slow process but an exciting one. As you see relationships grow, see change happening, and lives that are broken finding wholeness, it doesn't get any better than that. So listen, care, and invite, knowing God who loves us and loves all is with you.