

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**February 15, 2009**  
**I Corinthians 9:16-23**  
**All Things to All People**

The three main parts of the bible can be summarized in this way. The Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, tell us who God is. The story of Jesus Christ in the four gospels tells us that God loves us and is for us. And the letters of Paul help answer the question: In light of this love, how then should we live?

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul answered a question about whether it was proper to buy meat from the marketplaces if the common practice was to have that meat blessed in the name of Greek gods and pagan idols. Paul's answer was that the key issue was not a question of how the meat was prepared and blessed, but whether our choosing to buy the meat would strengthen or weaken someone else's faith. The focus should not be on the rules in principle, but rather on the rules as practiced.

Paul is walking a careful line here. As an educated and observant Jew, he never rejected his faith nor tried to convince other Jews to abandon their faith. His message about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was that the kingdom of God was at hand; the fulfillment of God's plan was coming to completion. God was now gathering up all people – children of Abraham and children of other lands – into one community of faith. For Paul, now was not the time for rules that divided. Rather it was a time for living out deeper truths that reflected our shared humanity as children of the living God.

Here's a modern example that illustrates this approach. Back in 1995, a few weeks before Christmas, you may remember how a boiler exploded at the Malden Mills textile factory in Lowell, Massachusetts. The factory, which employed 1500 people, burned to the ground. It was a tremendous blow to the community supported by this business for over three generations. The owner, Aaron Feuerstein, decided to keep all the workforce on the payroll until the factory could be rebuilt. He explained that he drew on his Jewish faith when faced with this crisis. As he put it, "When all is moral chaos, this is the time for you to be a mensch," using the Yiddish word for an honorable, decent person who seeks to do what is right. (We should all send Feuerstein's quote to Washington, reminding our nation's leaders that when all around there is economic and moral chaos, now is the time for us to be a mensch in our government policies and actions.)

The apostle Paul felt called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike, and he described this work as an obligation – a sacred necessity placed upon him out of his awareness of who God is and how, in Christ, God is truly for us. He says, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all

means save some.” To our ears, that statement is perfectly understandable, but potentially unsettling.

To be all things to all people: Doesn’t that suggest trying to blend in, chameleon-like, with everyone around me? That I lose my own individuality and pretend to be something I’m not just so that others will accept me? Isn’t that directly contrary to the message we tell our children over and over again: Be yourself. Don’t follow the crowd. If all your friends jumped off a cliff, would you jump with them?

To understand Paul, you have to listen carefully to what he says. Twice in this passage, Paul says: “I have become all things to all people” so that I might win more of them (v. 19) – to win them, to act profitably, to make a possible change in their lives – and so that I might by all means save some (v. 22) – to save them, bring them along the path of salvation, hope and true life.

That brings up a loaded word: Salvation. Far too often salvation is treated like a light switch: on/off, in/out, are you saved or are you not? True story. A woman was standing at the entrance to Macy’s in New York City waiting for her husband to arrive. At last he arrived and was overheard saying to his wife, “Sorry I’m late, dear. But the cabdriver refused to give me my change until I received Jesus Christ as my Savior.”<sup>1</sup> This definition of coercive salvation calls to mind the persistence of doorbell-ringing Jehovah’s Witnesses and their offer of Watchtower magazines in hopes of winning our salvation – which, interesting enough, has a distinctive Pittsburgh history. Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah’s Witness, a printer of pamphlets and the Watchtower magazine and one convinced the world was going to end in 1914, was a Pittsburgher who lived on the Northside near to where the Children’s museum is today.

The word “salvation” too often is used as a simplistic category describing whether we believe a person is going to heaven or not going to heaven. Far too frequently the phrase “Are you saved?” is simply a code word for, “Do you believe as I do?” which was never the intent of the word in scripture. The Greek word for salvation is *sozo*, which means to be saved, rescued, and protected, but also means to be healed, restored, and made whole. Being an instrument of God’s salvation is not about being a gatekeeper for a heavenly world to come. It means to be a mensch at all times; to be all things to all people as they share their stories and their pain, so that they might find healing, hope and true salvation.

I have heard a young mother say to me shortly after her divorce became final, “You cannot imagine how hard it is to go home that first night when your kids have been taken away and are sleeping somewhere else.” I’ve had coffee at people’s homes after a spouse has died and noticed how the house echoed with a palpable emptiness as the surviving partner padded around through the quiet rooms alone. We’ve all seen postpartum depressions, not just after the birth of a child, but similar depressions that come when jobs are lost, when relationships end or family moves away, when retirement is forced on you, or when a stroke cripples a hand or silences a voice.

To sit side by side in these pews is to become for one another a Jew, a Gentile, a widower, a divorcee, cancer-carrier, cancer survivor, wealthy, poor, whatever. We sit together fully ourselves, children of God, vessels of grace, tellers of the gospel story through word and deed, compassion and persistent, stubborn hope, so that some might be saved. It happens when we stand around a person at the baptism font, or look into someone eyes over a mutually-held communion tray, or say (and really mean it), “The peace of Christ be with you.” To do that is to be vulnerable enough, accessible and humble enough to be all things to all people, so that they (along with us) might be saved.

This is the obligation, the necessity we bear as members of the church and followers of Christ. Elie Wiesel said, “Let two beings become one and the world is no longer the same. Let two human creatures accept one another and creation will now have meaning, the meaning they will have imposed upon it.”<sup>2</sup> That is a profound statement, but the apostle Paul would have us go even farther. Our sitting-together, praying-together, becoming all things to all people cannot be accomplished through our own strength and abilities. It only becomes fully possible through grace – a freely-given grace that saves, that heals, redeems, and brings us true salvation.

And it is precisely here, in congregations like this one and thousands others around the world, where something of the world to come is glimpsed in the midst of the world that is. As Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas constantly says, “The world cannot know it is the world without the church being an alternative to the world and its solutions.”<sup>3</sup> As Jesus said, You are the light of the world; let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven” (Mt 5:14,16).

God is. God is for us. How then must we live? We answer that question in our private, individual lives – in our mutual, pew-sitting, city-dwelling lives – in our nation-building, global village, now and for future generations’ lives. We live under Christ’s law. We live by Christ’s love. We live, seeking to be all things to all people, so that the salvation blessings of the gospel might be faithfully proclaimed now and always.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times, Metropolitan Diary, April 26, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by William Willimon, *Theology Today*, October 1995.