

Date: February 7, 2021 (Epiphany 5)

1. Texts: Isaiah 40:21-31; Ps. 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39.
2. Subject: evangelism.
3. Topic: evangelism in context.
4. Aim: educate, challenge.
5. Proposition: "We can put our proclamation in the contexts of others."

EVANGELISM IS DOABLE

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.¹

If this really is the goal that St. Paul has set for us, I think I might as well give up. I can't be all things to all people—I can't be therapist and administrator and worship leader and evangelist and master of prayer and leader and...and...and... If that's what St. Paul is demanding of me—of any of us—then we are doomed to failure. And our downfall will be a tragic one, filled with guilt, remorse and feelings of inadequacy. If Paul meant that we have to be all things for all people, then we are doomed to failure.

But that's not what he meant. Oh, it is what he wrote, but the examples he gives just prior prove that that's not what he meant. He wrote that when proclaiming the gospel to Jews, he became like a Jew. Or when he was speaking with Gentiles, he became like a Gentile. To the weak, he thought like a weak person would. In becoming all things to all people, Paul was actually saying that he placed his proclamation within his listeners' contexts. He put himself in their shoes. He used their language and vocabulary. He used their famous sayings and quotes. In no way did Paul mean that he took on every role which every person needed. No: Paul meant that he tailored his proclamation to fit their circumstances.

We can do that. We can put our proclamation in terms and language that the other person can understand.

¹ 1 Corinthians 9:23.

Step one: Know Your Listener

If you and I are going to speak to people in terms they can understand, then we have to understand their terms. We have to know them—their issues, concerns and hopes. This means we have to listen, really listen. The goal in our listening is not to find a chink in their emotional armor that we can exploit. The goal in our listening is to know the person, to open the door to compassion and genuine love. If we intend to share our experience, we have to know the people with whom we are sharing.

Step two: Know Ourselves

The intent is to share our own experience of Jesus and of the salvation that comes from a life-changing relationship with him. This necessarily means that we have to know what our own experience of saving faith is. If we intend to share our experience with others, we have to know ourselves.

Step three: Start Sharing

The people with whom we share cannot wait until we know it all or feel confident about our skills. To be honest, that day will likely never come. We have to step out in faith, as many people say. We have to act. It is far better to risk making a mistake than to allow fear to shut our mouths. If we intend to share our faith experience with others, we have to make the decision to just do it.

These three steps will fulfill Paul's expectation that we become all things to all people that we might by all means save some. Of course, you and I never "save" anybody. That's not our job. We can't do it. But we certainly can be the channel through which God pours his invitation to salvation. That's really the way it works, isn't it. God never forces someone to be saved. God never makes anyone invite the Holy Spirit into his or her life. There is no divine coercion in conversion. God uses Jesus' disciples as the hands, feet and voices through whom he pours his invitation to be saved.

That's why we have to choose to go through those three steps. God is using us to fulfill his plan of salvation for others.

But as we do channel God's salvation to others, we cannot take responsibility for their choices. Yes, we prepare. Yes, we act—and hopefully do it well. But God only makes an invitation through us. It is up to the individual to respond or not. The choice—and the responsibility—are theirs. Just as the choice and the responsibility to share are ours.

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

This quote isn't as potentially damaging as it might have seemed. It's a worthy goal, to put your proclamation of your saving faith in terms that others can understand. It's a privilege to be used by God in the faith journey of others. It's actually exciting to think that God himself will speak to others through our words, actions and thoughts. You and I can be the voice of God speaking to others in their own personal circumstances. Let's try saying, "Thanks be to God" for that.

AMEN.