

All Things to All People

1 Corinthians 9:16-27

It's Super Bowl weekend, and our neighbors to the north are enjoying all of the attention their city receives, though not as much as if the Vikings had defeated the Eagles two weeks ago. Sports pundits focus on Tom Brady and Bill Belichick and the dynasty created in New England. But while they get the focus, others should get more credit for the wins.

What makes these teams so great is that they're often made up of players other teams let go. Six players from both teams were let go by the Buffalo Bills in the offseason, and yet they play in the Super Bowl while the Bills are watching from their couches. Alshon Jeffrey, who has the third most receiving yards in Bears franchise history after his five seasons in Chicago, was a big part of the Eagles' win over the Vikings. New England and Bill Belichick have had great success by taking undrafted players or players let go by other teams and turning them into a team. Even Tom Brady started his NFL career as a back-up quarterback, while Eagles quarterback Nick Foles tries to be the first backup since Brady to win the Super Bowl. It takes a team effort by players often overlooked to win such a big game.

Here in the church, we can forget that applies to us, as well. We can forget that faith isn't an individual sport, but a team sport, requiring people to get together. We can forget that it's not just about the professional church workers, but it's about all of the people who make up the church working together.

Think about your own life. Where would you be without the people God sent into your life to serve you? Your parents cared for you and loved you. Your teachers taught you what you need to know. Your friends were there for you in time of need and to celebrate the good times. Your employer was there to give you a job so you could feed your family. Your pastor or some other person shared the Gospel and told you the Good News of Jesus so that you could experience the freedom of his forgiveness and grace. Everything you have came to you as a gift—and now in joyful thanksgiving to God, you have the opportunity to pay it forward.

Following the example of Jesus, the early church was known for showing love. The ancient Christian writer

Tertullian reports what the Romans said about the Christians in the second century: "See how they *love* one another!" Sociologist Rodney Stark described how the early Christians lived out that love. "To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity." Christians were known for their love, for breaking down barriers, for being all things to all people.

That was the example Paul gave the church, and what he tells us to do. What Paul is talking about is for us to give up the comfort of our chairs and couches and our ordinary way of life in order to go out into the highways and byways of life, seeking the lost sheep for whom the Good Shepherd gave up his life. We are to adapt our language and culture in order that others can see the Light of the world shining through us. That's all there is to it. Give up your safe little world and your tight circle of friends in order to let more people see how you reflect the goodness and mercy of Christ. Go out of your way to tell people, wherever you find them, that Jesus Christ is Lord. Pass on the Good News that you have so freely received from someone who took the time to tell you about it. If you have to go into rough places to tell of Christ, do that. If you have to go into high places, do that. If you have to go to strange places, do that. That's what Paul means by being all things to all people. He wants you to carry as your central message the Good News of Jesus Christ, and He wants you to carry it as far as you can.

But you cannot do it alone. How could you speak the Gospel to everyone in the whole world, with all the competing demands on your time and energy? Not even Paul, for all of his missionary journeys, could do his work without Silas and Barnabas and Timothy and others who traveled with him and supported him. Even in this age of mass communication and social media, no one person can reach the whole world. Not even Billy Graham could do that, no matter how many crusades he preached and stadiums he filled. No one could do that alone, not even Jesus, which is why he chose twelve

apostles—and you and me. As God’s people, we don’t work alone. We work as a team. And we help carry the message of Jesus’ love together.

No, we cannot tell everyone. But we can tell the people we know who have not yet heard or known the everlasting God, the loving Lord Jesus. Only 77% of Iowans are Christians, and only 36% are in worship on a given week. God does not call you to evangelize the great, nameless, faceless crowds—the throng of humanity. No, he calls us to tell the person in front of us right here, right now, the person whose face we can see, the person whose name we may or may not know, but the person whom, nevertheless, Jesus loves and misses the most.

No, you cannot be all things to all people all the time. That will only run you down and wear out your witness. There will always be more to do. The poor you will have with you always. And there will always be another lost soul that needs saving. And there will always be another neighbor needing your love and good works. Working together, and by the grace of God, we can still save some. We can still help a few.

There’s a story about a man walking along a beach covered with starfish. Realizing that he cannot help all of them, he walks on. He comes across a little boy throwing the starfish back into the ocean. The man asks the boy why he’s bothering, when he can’t help them all. “My help mattered to this one,” the boy replied as he tossed another starfish back into the ocean.

You may not be able to be all things to all people. You may be able to be all that one person needs to see or hear or know to learn how much God loves them. Maybe it’s through helping an international student learn English, or inviting them into your home. Maybe it’s by shoveling your neighbor’s driveway, and sharing how God’s love encouraged you to do so. Maybe it’s by being a shoulder for a friend to cry on, or being a friendly visitor to someone in the hospital or in prison. It may not matter to the whole world, but it matters to that one.

There is no limit to the ways in which we can serve God in our church and community. We have total freedom to give ourselves in service to one another. Having been freed by Christ, we are freed to serve in the name of Jesus who became a servant for us all.

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