

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
ISAIAH 40:21-31  
PSALM 147:1-11  
I CORINTHIANS 9:16-23  
MARK 1:29-39  
February 4, 2024

### *All Things and All People!*

**All things to all people! Perhaps no other text is open to misconception, misinterpretation, misrepresentation, than this section of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, an epistle that is truly full of interesting, intriguing, conjecture, Paul’s thoughts opening a plethora of avenues for dialogue and discussion. I confess that in the past when engaging this text regarding all things evangelical and/or evangelistic—evangelism being the operative word here—that I have often taken the apostle to task for what for a long time I have perceived to imply blatant misperceptions, ecclesiological, theological, viewpoints that are easy to make when reading this specific text. Yes, I have even been known to belittle what I have often stated can be understood as a call to embrace the height of hypocritical thinking and practice. Yes, a double take is necessary in analyzing Paul’s somewhat circular argument. Oh wait, “double taking” is the sermon for next week. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves! A first glance at these Pauline musings found in our lectionary reading from I Corinthians today, indicates that he is a chameleon, this lection advocating that Paul could and would twist himself into knots, transforming himself into whoever, perhaps whatever, he needed to be to engage with, to relate to someone, anyone, in any given moment, as he attempted to reach an individual or group, as he preached the gospel as he had quickly come to understand it. As Robert Scott Nash ponders, “One could read Paul’s words about becoming all things to all people as a shrewd strategy of duplicity. Simply take on the appearance of similarity to those with whom you are engaged at the moment so that you can befriend them and get them to do what you want. Then move on to the next group and don another disguise. Chameleonic (I love that word) behavior works well enough in politics—don’t we know it—but something smells ‘fishy’ when we find it in religion. (Ditto! Paul’s) claim to become all things to all people may make us wonder where the real Paul is behind all those masks.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Scott Nash, “1 Corinthians,” in *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2009), 276-77.

**Masquerade! Reminds me of the old game show from 1950-67, “What’s My Line?”, or to be more up to date, “The Masked Singer!” Fair critique!** I dare suggest that if Paul were guilty of duplicitous activity in his missionary efforts, guilty though not charged, all this counterproductive behavior would hope to accomplish would be turning oneself into a human pretzel. Attempting these kinds of impossible literary calisthenics would amount to nothing more than exercises in futility, laughable at best, buffoonery on steroids, disingenuity the order of the day. Reminds me of the old floor game from the 1960s, Twister! And while arguing that this idea is Paul’s prerogative, I have been forced to take another look and go deeper into exactly what Paul surely must have been trying to convey in his theological reflections. Yes, there is a fine line, a careful balancing act, and on occasion the apostle seems to cross a line, going beyond the boundaries, stretching the limits, in his homiletical pursuits. But we are going to give him the benefit of the doubt this morning as we go on another homiletical journey together this morning. Off we go!

**Sometimes it seems harder and harder these days to be your authentic self, the peer pressures of society, politics, and religion constantly nipping at your heels, the threat of pushback from opposing forces is always an ever-present concern but not always on our minds. And I wrote these words before the aforementioned Thursday incident, the semi-threatening scare in front of the church as example A and following! Part of the challenge of life and living is wondering about, worrying about, what the neighbors think! I would add that this trend seems to be especially exacerbated in our attempts to give of ourselves as people of faith, yes, Christian faith, or at least in sharing our flavor, our version of it, the very word “Christian” now soiled, hijacked and held hostage, used as a weapon, as a buzz word, as code language, often indicating, standing for the very things that many of us find disgusting, offensive, and reprehensible. Society overall has come to accept a stereotype of Christians and Christianity that is unfortunately one sided, fueled by irrational, mindless fundamentalism, driven by anti-intellectual, and even dangerously subversive, maniacal perceptions, especially if factoring in the zealous agenda of the white Christian nationalist movement advocated by many on the political and religious right. Yes, contemporary Christendom has been irreparably damaged, compromised in a host of evil ways. All combined these current agitations, much of these wicked machinations are frequently driven by intimidation, initiated by scare tactics, if not outright threats, the sum-total of which amount to far more than harmless rhetoric, revealing much more than subtle nuance or semantics. Every insult is injurious, carrying with each salvo connotations that add to the crises. It is such a sad day that many non-**

church attending types today are not even aware that there is such a thing as a progressive or liberal Christian movement, that there are committed believers, followers of Jesus, advocating for social justice, that our works will prove the pudding of our beliefs and faith. The times have changed and are a changing! **The faith of our forebears is devolving before our very eyes! Some lightweights even proudly proclaim with utmost conviction, with absolute certitude, that the Bible and social justice are antithetical, incompatible in every conceivable way! Really! Seriously! The fact remains that the Bible is saturated wholly throughout, peppered with social justice, yes, totally a social justice document, except in the occasional places where it is not! That viewpoint is just nuts!** Whenever I watch HBO's Real Time with Bill Maher, a politically driven program, I get the sense, as the cynical host belittles Christianity, that he has no clue, no concept, of what might be called our brand, the values that many of us hold dear and desperately defend as our dogmatic line in the sand. We have even arrived at the point where an element of fear drives our modus operandi around our faithfulness. Anxiety in the system is troubling every system! A couple of weeks ago in Atlanta, my former church, Virginia-Highland, was vandalized, the welcoming banners ripped from the façade of the building. Newsworthy! Their decision, rather than retreat, was to simply add five more banners advocating their gospel imperative, their perspective, positions we certainly have in common and share in a plethora of ways! We feel their pain! With heavy hearts we admit that some of our days are dark! We are in uncharted territory!

**So, what was it like to be the apostle Paul, a former Pharisee and Law-abiding, Law-observing Jew? After all, this newly minted proselyte to the faith had just recently converted as he traveled that lonesome highway called the Damascus road, turning on a dime, embracing the very faith he had zealously tried to suppress if not squash altogether. Only a short time ago, textually speaking, (see the book of Acts for details) Paul, a notorious zealot for an insidious cause, had been on a demonic mission, believing his passion to be of divine origin, even to the point of overseeing the slaughter of the faithful, making martyrs of them all, Steven being the most known, perhaps most famous among them. What was it like for Paul to live in his oft tormented skin, as uncomfortable as he seems to have been, knowing that he had created adversaries, true enemies, on both sides of the religious aisle? Imagine that! Surely, what an odd place it must have been, Paul perhaps, at least on occasion in the dark night of his soul as a former- Jew-now-turned-Christian experiencing some doubt, Paul's spirit at least somewhat conflicted! Maybe, maybe not! Finding his equilibrium after his radically transformative conversion, an experience of a lifetime, an existential**

transfiguration if ever there was one, unlike any other, must have been challenging for the former Jew and Pharisee, almost like treading water, a daily exercise in fighting futility as he found voice. And yet, led by the touch of the transforming Spirit of Christ, Paul found balance and his voice, as new as his emerging and evolving vernacular now was, the apostle using an entirely new vocabulary, speaking a completely new language. A close and critical reading of his letters reveals his struggles as real as they surely were, many of them masqueraded as metaphor but clearly indicating what seemed to be manifest in the internal turmoil of his ongoing emotional, mental, and spiritual battles, conflicts revealed between the lines in the text, perhaps a window into his personality, maybe some physical afflictions adding to his personal dilemma. After all, Paul never names his thorn in the flesh, but whatever that offending, haunting and hurting, affliction was, it must have impacted him greatly, always seeming larger than life, never far behind in the rearview mirror but swirling all around him, certainly in front of him wherever he went. And Paul went to a lot of places.

**And so today we find the apostle waxing eloquent about his approach to preaching the gospel he now strives to live, Paul loving everything about all he has learned about the way of Christ, Paul's metaphorical mantra often repeated, dead but now raised to new life, resurrection the operative word for every Christian convert, literally and symbolically.** Where would Christendom be without the theological implications articulated in Paul's voluminous writings? Some would argue that we get a mixed bag with what sometimes appear as Paul's ramblings, musings that were totally based on opinion, his opinions, and no doubt were not vetted by anyone else before he sent them. Yes, we get the good, the bad, and the ugly, but I think we are the better for the vulnerability of his internal struggles, informed and impacted by his thinking and writing, as frustrated as some of us might be with some of his more controversial material. Just saying! So back to the text! **J. Paul Sampley, referring to Paul's potentially confusing "all things to all people" says that "this phrase, taken out of context, has come to mean all sorts of things to all sorts of people.** First, the context in the letter. Paul is describing his adaptability in service of evangelism."<sup>2</sup> Me thinks Paul could have said that! Sampley affirms that Paul is describing his approach, his adaptability in service to evangelism, Paul speaking in the proverbial hyperbole which unfortunately, my opinion here, confuses and confounds more than it comprehends. Sampley adds, **"For Paul, whatever advances the gospel is what governs his comportment."** Love that word! ". . . Paul relates one of the secrets," shhhh, don't tell anyone, "of his evangelistic

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<sup>2</sup>J. Paul Sampley, "1 Corinthians", in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. X, ed. Leander E. Keck, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 911.  
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**prowess: He goes to people, where they are, on their own terms. He does not require that (seekers) come to him or that they meet him on his own ground. He, a Jew, is an apostle to gentiles, non-Jews, but they do not have to become Jews in order to be welcomed into the gospel. He knows that the gospel (has the power to build) bridges (to overcome) ethnic boundaries and works its power (its magic and miracle) in whatever context.”**<sup>3</sup> But that is not what Paul actually is often quoted as saying. I will give one translator some credit, however, for attempting to clean up the lingo by saying that Paul “acts” like whoever and whatever but that is nothing more or less than interpretive license. Other translations declare that Paul “became as”, which is close but still not quite. The simile: great literary device using “as” or “like” to compare! Some flatly suggest the idea of “Paul is!” So, indeed this is a text in which we have no choice but to interpret what we think the apostle was saying, hoping to convey, what we think that he meant rather than literally buying what he appears to be selling, biblical literalism not in play here. Yes, Paul seems to teeter on the edge of a most compromised opinion! In the case of this writing, it could easily be argued, as Sampley notes, “What is true about the gospel is true about love, its central expression: Love always engages others, precisely where they are; it does not require them to come over or up to one’s standards before it can be operative.”<sup>4</sup> A salient point Sampley makes is the reminder that “. . . becoming all things to all people does not involve losing or giving up one’s own center, becoming gelatin-molded to whatever form appears . . . so Paul evangelizes on the principle that by preaching the gospel to all sorts of people, meeting them on their ground, he is affirming that nothing, no human institution or practice or distinction, can be permitted to hinder the communication that God cares passionately about all of God’s creatures.”<sup>5</sup>

**So, we are back to where we started in this circuitous literary adventure with this profound missionary evangelist. Just how far do we take Paul’s metaphorical imagery before it falters or falls apart completely and we are suddenly forced to tap dance, yes, tiptoe, around our convictions, the core values, that we have accidentally and carefully, beliefs we have intentionally, honed throughout our lifetimes, bedrock cornerstones that have come to define us to the depths of our being? How do we honor what is sacred to us, holding dear the things that continue to prepare the pathways before us as we hopefully continue to faithfully, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, evolve, individually and collectively? Against a cacophony of sounds that are reminiscent of Paul’s most famous Corinthian soliloquy, his monologue on love in I**

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 912.

Corinthians 13—Valentine’s Day is coming for those who need the reminder—there is a whole lot of chatter and clatter echoing throughout the land, reverberating like those loud noisy gongs and clanging symbols that Paul obviously had heard somewhere and found so annoying. Perhaps society in general has always been carried on the wings of dissonant voices, no matter how rational, archaic, inane or insane they may be, public debate in the public square, the arena of human life, a necessary part of not only our interaction, but our progression as a species, evolution being the operative word here! All that being acknowledged as a part of life’s ebb and flow, our message must continue to be focused, sharpened, crystal clear, the clarion call of our testimony on point, our witness, both verbal and actional, profoundly visible for all to see. Clarity is the watchword here! **We cannot afford to send mixed signals in our daily discourse, toying with convenience when it suits our fancy and when it seems safe and secure enough to do, but must boldly, yes, with much courage, declare the beliefs we proclaim to hold dear. We cannot afford the myopia of mixed metaphors that get lost in the shuffle, reduced to the malaise of noncommittal stands that scream that everything is merely relative, that can be dismissively reduced to an irrelevant relativism. This is especially true in matters of faith, as we seek to navigate fragile relationships and not offend in the process.** There is peril when, in the interest of maintaining what at its core gives us nothing more than a false sense of security, we give the safe and secure perception of a faux unity that never existed in the first place. There is no room for facades, any ruse, not being real in all but the worst situations! Détente is not exactly the stuff of close, covenantal, relationships! Everyone already has more than a hint, knowing full well our true identity, fully aware where any of us stand on absolutely everything **and so we might as well come clean and be honest about it, our religious stuff, might as well own it, all of it, authentic and genuine in every way, driven by our internal compass, the integrity that undergirds our ethical and moral values, yes as individuals and as a corporate beloved faith community, an actively missional church, activism being the operative word.** Besides, sometimes we may have to suffer fools and idiots, but tolerating intolerance and those who are intolerant is intolerable! Every time! All the time! My voice will not be squelched! Our voices will not be squelched! We will be heard, yes, in the city square, definitely echoing in the public arena! We will not be silenced! I guess what I am suggesting, if we for a moment choose to take the low road with our perspective on Paul, is that the apostle’s methodology, when reduced to its least common denominator as a path of least resistance, simply will not work now, assuming that this lazy posture ever did. At some point you dig yourself a hole or back yourself into a corner from which there is no escape, explanations getting lost in translations. The bottom line is that everyone has a right to be heard, no matter the

content, and that is a scary proposition, but a first amendment guarantee that I believe is also a divine right for every divinely created image stamped by the imprimatur of the eternal and holy. That being said, ours is a voice that must be heard, whether this presumably progressive word is assumed to be alternative, radical, or even heretical. Time to double-down on the message! We must be willing to own it, all of it! For me, guilty as charged! I will own the accusation because it is true, hospitable welcome and inclusion at the core of my belief system. Besides there is a rich history of heresy in our tradition! I choose, however, to not be a victim! I will, if at all possible, take a pass on martyrdom! Judgmental finger pointing is the inherent risk of any worthwhile dialogue! We must stand out in the crowd, as conspicuous as is ever possible!

**And while I am not prone to speak for others, I am going to take what might be considered some liberties, a little bit of license, with Paul's letter this morning and speak for the apostle. After all, Paul has been dead for quite some time now and cannot do anything about it! After all, we call that commentary, preaching! I think that the one word that is needed to best interpret, to most fully understand, what Paul was painstakingly trying to say is "empathy"! I believe that Paul was trying to say to his first century audience that they needed to be empathetic, to find the grace needed to walk in the shoes of others, to find ways to relate, to trade places, when possible, at least with some appropriate degree of emotional transference, to misuse a term, to honestly engage with those of other cultures and faiths, contexts that always seem foreign when first encountered. Part of being empathetic is ensconced in the ability to listen, yes, to empathize in ways that are openly vulnerable even as the one sharing his or her story is revealing their own vulnerability in what may very well be a very painful, traumatic, narrative, each edition of their journey uniquely woven and intensely, intimately, personal. This level of relating and relationship requires as much as possible a level playing field of engagement. If we can imagine what it is like to be a person of another race, another gender, another sexual expression, sexuality such a hot button issue within the Christian community, dividing so many families of faith, whatever it is that gives anyone their unique identity and perspective, the characteristics that help shape, yes, form their very being from even the earliest age. Paul was not advocating that we be something that we are not, disingenuous in a way that provided a mere means to an end, hypocritical just to make the sale, to close the deal, to make one more convert like a trophy on the wall, to get one more conversionary transaction in the books. **And folks, we can only do what Paul is promoting if we are secure in our own shoes, if we know exactly, or at least mostly, who we are, if we are comfortable in our own skin. And accomplishing that awareness****

**demands clarity about what we believe. Wrestling with this text once again, trying to read it as if for the first time, has been a good exegetical exercise for me, because for some reason I am often quick to critique and condemn, to judge, even bashing Paul on occasion. Yes, I am more than sometimes guilty of failing to be fair and give the apostle his due, the benefit of the doubt. Might as well admit it! Might as well name it and own it! Good for the soul! Oddly, it has taken me a long time to reach these conclusions, discovering what is truly a hospitably welcoming and inclusive hermeneutic that is indeed graciously inviting and loving. This expansively open perspective on this specific text is indeed helpful. This interpretive understanding works for me! I hope this work works for you!**

**Indeed, as the song sings, we have a story to gladly, joyfully, tell to neighbors one and all, to all the nations, a word that will turn their hearts aright, and it begins with every substantive conversation, every significant interaction, everything we say and do in our daily walk. Perhaps the best witness we bring brings with it no words! As is attributed to Saint Frances of Assisi paraphrasing, I am sure, “Preach the gospel! Use words when necessary!” Once upon a time in the first of at least two letters to the Corinthians Paul laid out a proposal, acknowledging the fine line he was balancing, surely teetering on the edge, joining in the careful dance he was choreographing in real time as he went and as he wrote. As we live out our faith, making many mistakes for all to see as we go, we find ourselves in the same place, seeking to relate while holding fast to our integrity. Indeed, we walk by faith and not by sight, and yes, cliché as it truly is “there but by the grace of God go we all!” **Faith, just like our lives, is a marathon and not a sprint, learning as we go. It is always about the journey and not the destination, though we all land somewhere! Sometimes we get a do over and sometimes we do not, but God is always lovingly gracious, and we do get an “A” for effort, everyone of us getting a very coveted and well-earned participation trophy. Paul was reminding his readers then, and all of us who would follow, admonishing us to get in the game and give it our best shot, perhaps our influence making a life-changing experience for someone who just might be looking for what we have to offer, our proverbial cups of cold water, “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey!” Goodluck and Godspeed!****

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and loves all people, expecting all of us to do the same! Amen and amen!**