

***One Gospel, Custom Designed for All***  
***I Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39***  
***February 8, 2009***

Do you remember that fast food jingle, “Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce. Special orders don’t upset us.” That hamburger chain promised customers, “You can have it your way.”

It takes me longer to go to the grocery store these days because there are so many choices! I simply want to get a container of yogurt – but there are 8 different brands. Then you have the choice of light, low-fat, non-fat, full fat. You get to decide if you want it with fruit or not; fruit on the top, fruit on the bottom, or fruit mixed in already. And of course, there are 20 flavors from which to choose!

We have become accustomed to “having it our way” in whatever fashion suits our fancy. Growing commercial ventures have long known that quality customer service is essential to the well-being and future of business. If the customer isn’t happy with the product or the service, they will find another vendor. There’s enough competition and choices that people won’t waste time at a place that doesn’t suit their needs. In order to stay in business, retailers have to accommodate their customers and offer services that cater to the varied interests of consumers.

It’s a lesson that Paul the missionary learned nearly 2,000 years ago. He knew that he had to adapt to different kinds of people in order to effectively communicate the gospel. Paul was exceptionally flexible in sharing the good news of God’s love with others. He was comfortable approaching Jew or Gentile, male or female, weak or strong, rich or poor on their own terms. He adopted the vocabulary and viewpoint of his audience. Paul was passionate about making the good news of God’s love accessible to all people because he knew that God shows no partiality. God doesn’t play favorites.

Paul said that he became all things to all people in order that all might share in the blessings of the gospel. Paul cultivates the capacity to identify with the “other” rather than demanding that the “other” become as he is. His example for us is to embody the good news of God’s love in a way that enters into the context and world of the persons around us. It involves becoming like those who may differ from us in order to understand how God’s message would be relevant to different populations. It is reverse hospitality. Instead of inviting others into our space, we enter their world and find out how to become “one of them” – how to speak their language and live in their culture. In doing so, the distinctions of “us” and “them” are broken down. All are one because all are transformed in the reality of God’s great love.

St. Francis of Assisi knew the power of the ministry of empathy. One brother in Francis' community was having trouble enduring a period of fasting. In the middle of the night, his spirit broke as he groaned from the pangs of hunger. Francis woke up the entire community and had all of the friars break their fast (himself included) so as not to embarrass the weak brother. Although Francis called his community to strict standards of living, he was able to show compassion to those who struggled to achieve the ideal.<sup>i</sup>

This is a radically different way of doing ministry, but it's the way of the first disciples and it is the way of twenty-first century churches that are vibrant, alive, and growing. They custom design the good news for various target populations. They speak the language of the people they want to serve, using music, film, internet, whatever media is utilized by other cultures. Mainline Protestant denominations aren't accustomed to being in mission. But the nature of our times means that we are going to have to get out of our comfort zones, out of our pews and out of our buildings, taking the good news to the streets, going to people and places where we may not want to go. We can no longer expect them to become like us; they're not going to. We need to enter into their world, identify with their hurts and hopes, and embody the good news of God's love in our being and doing.

In our postmodern era many consider themselves practical atheists, thinking that faith has no relevancy or value to their lives. Dinesh D'Souza says that, "We are now in a secular culture. We can't take Christian assumptions for granted in the way we could before. As Christians we must be bilingual, speaking a religious language in church and a secular language in society."<sup>ii</sup> We can speak of Christianity in ways that make no appeal to revelation or scripture, but use the same tools of history, philosophy, and reason to engage rational thinkers. It doesn't mean that we compromise our beliefs, but we consider the other person's context and use a medium that resonates with them.

The invitation from Paul is to embody the good news in a way that enters into the context and world of the persons around us. Dan was an elderly man who was dying of cancer. He could no longer drive his old Pontiac safely but resisted giving up his driving license. He fought the oncoming shadow of death as it robbed his body of strength, causing him to need a walker as he navigated his way slowly and painfully from his bedroom to the bathroom and back. Marvin, a quiet member of the church, moved into Dan's neighborhood and began stopping to greet Dan as he sat on the front porch of his house, spending time listening to Dan's woes, needs, and stories. In time Dan invited Marvin into his house for a cup of coffee. As the months went by, Marvin would be asked to drive Dan to the doctor's office, to help cook and do the dishes when Dan's sister could not be there to help, then to help with the washing, and to change Dan's bed linens. No one

else, except his sister Mabel, could help Dan. They might steal something, or worse, not treat Dan right. Dan had a long history of keeping people at a distance. His early childhood and youth were marked with stories of abuse and neglect, causing his basic trust to be thin and easily threatened.

As Marvin prayed and waited in God's presence, bringing this elderly friend to God with all his fears and needs, Marvin began to understand that he was being a servant of the gospel. He was learning how to be weak with this weak, distrusting, dying man – and not demanding that Dan change his ways.

It occurred to Marvin that the stories of the scriptures, especially Jesus' love for persons who are weak, needy, and somehow rejected or abused by society, might connect with Dan on an inner level. One evening after supper Marvin stopped by to visit Dan. After sharing the accounts of their days, Marvin said he would like to tell Dan a story. Like a little child, Dan listened while Marvin told Dan the story of the man in the synagogue with the withered hand. When Marvin finished there was a long silence and then Dan said, "I never heard it that way. What would happen if Jesus was to see me?" "He would invite you to stretch out your hand, too," said Marvin. "Dan," he continued, "Jesus is here, in your room. Just as he went to the synagogue in Capernaum, so he is here with us this evening."

Dan finally asked, "Could you help me see him? My eyes are pretty poor." Marvin asked the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of Dan's heart to help him sense Jesus presence. As Dan waited, Marvin was still, and then, slowly, his right hand raised and stretched out in front of him.

Marvin was learning to be a servant of the gospel, patiently waiting, listening, offering faithful service and caring presence, and finally telling a story of good news. As Dan journeyed closer to death, he began seeing Jesus more clearly as Marvin prayed with him. He began to see death as a doorway to relief and rest, rather than a dark and frightening chasm.<sup>iii</sup>

This ministry of coming alongside others is the kind of incarnational ministry to which Paul calls us. It is a ministry of meeting people where they are, with their doubts, questions, fears, loneliness, and longings. It's a matter of listening to people on their own terms and sharing the gospel in a way that touches their life situation. Most of us do this naturally in friendships. What is more challenging for Christians is to take the next step of sharing the story of how God's love has made a difference in our lives.

These anxious economic times may provide us an opportunity to share how our faith is a source of hope and strength when life is uncertain. Persons who are anxious and depressed are not likely to reach out to others for help. They need others to reach out to them and to do so with perseverance, without giving up. Much of ministry is about being present, showing up, being available to one another. When present with another we can listen to their needs and fears with

empathy. When an opportunity presents itself, we might share how faith in God has given us courage in the face of distress. We might share a scripture verse that anchors us with strength, such as one from Isaiah 40:31, “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

It’s important that when we seize the opportunity to share the faith, we stay on message. Too frequently these days an erroneous message has been communicated about Christianity. David Kinnaman has done a three year study of young Americans between the ages of 16 and 29 to understand how they view Christianity. His study, published in a book titled *unchristian*, reveals that the majority of young persons in America think Christians are judgmental, homophobic, intolerant, anti-intellectual, too political, hypocritical, and insensitive.<sup>iv</sup> Given this perception, it is no wonder that people are turned off by faith. The actions and attitudes of the church seem to be misrepresenting a holy, loving, just God who desires not to push people away, but to gather them in to relationship.

Jesus’ message spoke of God’s generous love and embrace of people, including the weak, the isolated, the outcast, the downtrodden. The message we communicate by our outreach to another should reflect that warm embrace, and not communicate the expectation that everyone fit into the same rigid box.

Paul invites us to live our lives in ways that are invitational and hospitable to others, meeting them where they are, building trust, being present and responsive to their needs. Who comes to mind that is in need of a warm caring presence? Who might you call this week, perhaps someone who is anxious about their future or someone whom you haven’t seen for a while?

Jesus was intentional about spreading his message beyond those who’ve already heard it. Through our presence and our stories, may we also move beyond our own community of faith to plant seeds of faith, hope, and love in other hearts.

Eternal Presence, from the beginning you spoke a word of life and it was good. You have continued to speak throughout the ages, through mighty acts of deliverance and through messengers who dared to speak the truth. Your Son Jesus spoke your message in word and deed, embodying your justice and grace. We are grateful that your message is still viable and relevant today. We long to hear the good news and to share it with hurting hearts and with our broken world.

Forgive us for those times in which we have not been faithful to your message. Sometimes we stray from the path of righteousness. Lead us back onto your path, O God. Set us aright to follow as Jesus guides.

We pray that your message of peace with justice would be proclaimed in nations around the world, remembering especially Zimbabwe, the Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine. Hear our prayers, O Lord.

Shout your message of righteousness in our nation, among leaders struggling to balance budgets and spend resources wisely. Whisper your message of hope to those who worry about making ends meet. Rally your people around your dream for the common good.

We pray for those living in despair who may be drawn to harm themselves or others. Send them a messenger of hope to be a companion.....

### **For Your Personal Worship through the Week**

**February 8, 2009**

- Jesus said, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” What is the message Jesus came to proclaim?
- Mahatma Gandhi said, “My life is my message.” What message is your life proclaiming?
- If our church and the people in it are "the only Jesus" some people will ever meet, would those people recognize him? Why or why not?
- What faith theme have you recently noted in a movie or book? Might it provide an entry to conversation about faith with someone who is unchurched?
- Use a breath prayer to help you be still and listen to God. Breathe deep and slowly. As you inhale, pray “Be still” As you exhale, pray, “Know that I am God!” Continue the prayer for several minutes, returning to the words of the prayer when your mind wanders. Repetition of the prayer will help you focus and sense the presence of God.
  - *Be still, and know that I am God!* Psalm 46:10a

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<sup>i</sup> Dennis E. Tamburello, *Lectionary Homiletics*, February 2003, p. 10.

<sup>ii</sup> Dinesh D’Souza, Grace Cathedral Forum, December 14, 2008, [www.gracecathedral.org](http://www.gracecathedral.org).

<sup>iii</sup> Wendy J. Miller, *Lectionary Homiletics*, February 2003, p. 8.

<sup>iv</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...And Why It Matters*, Baker Books, 2007.

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