

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

St. Paul inspires people not only for his conversion to Christ and his letters to early Christians, but also for the expanse of his ministry. He brought both Jews and Gentiles to Christ, and he traveled far and wide to preach the gospel in person. In today's reading from First Corinthians, Paul explains his motivation: "to win over as many as possible" to the gospel of Christ. He says, "an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach!"

To enhance the effect, Paul offered the gospel "free of charge." Now, he accepted hospitality from people along the way. We have records of him collecting money for the Church in Jerusalem, but never for himself.

Apart from this free service, Paul used another technique to spread the gospel. He writes, "I have made myself a slave to all.... To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak." He tried everything. He learned about people, their philosophies and their struggles. He showed himself a companion in order to draw them toward belief in Christ. He summed this up with a famous quote still in use after countless generations: "I have become all things to all." Now, I often hear the contrary: "You can't be all things to all people. You have to take a stand; you have to expect some people to disagree with you. If you want everyone to like you, don't preach Christ. Sell ice cream. Then they'll love you."

Furthermore, people don't respect chameleons. If you say one thing to one person, but the opposite to please someone else, you may think your popularity is growing, but as soon as people find out, you lose their respect.

Paul seems to understand all of this as he completes that thought. His full statement is this: "I have become all things to all, to save at least some." Paul realized that in spite of his efforts not everyone was going to believe the gospel. But he believed the gospel, and it impelled him to share its message with everyone. Paul adjusted his style of preaching according to his audience, but he did not sacrifice his content.

These verses both challenge and console us. At times we say we believe in the gospel, but we do not preach it to others. When other people make racist remarks, when men demean women, when friends ridicule people of faith, they all present opportunities for us to say something—even if it's simply the words, "Well, I don't agree." At other times, we've made our beliefs clear, but others do not accept them and continue acting contrary to the gospel. This happens even within families, where parents hold one set of values and are saddened when their children adopt an opposing point of view. Whomever we are trying to win over, if we have tried and failed, we can take Paul's dose of realism: he preached in order "to save at least some." Becoming all things to all doesn't mean that all will therefore cooperate. Paul challenges us to preach the gospel, and he consoles us when it does not end the way we hoped.

Even when Paul failed, he still achieved something else: an inner peace that he had done what he felt obliged to do. He traveled much of the known world, and he spoke with everyone he could in order to have a share in the gospel's promise. Sometimes we give up on others too quickly; other times we haven't tried enough. Always, with St. Paul we strive to win over as many as possible.