



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 5TH EPIPHANY

I CORINTHIANS 9:16-23

FEBRUARY 7, 2021

“WHAT ARE THEIR TENDENCIES?”

Last time we spoke about what a Christian is; settling, from among numerous options on a two- word definition – “in Christ.” By way of a question about eating meat sacrificed to idols – we said that someone “in Christ” - a baptized believer living amongst other baptized believers, is free to eat whatever they want - our faith imposes no dietary restrictions.

But being “in Christ” means to be willing, even eager to forgo eating, wearing, drinking, saying, tweeting, posting or doing anything that might hinder the faith of someone else who was “in Christ” or prevent someone who is not from coming to Christ. We need to “watch ourselves” and ask, “how does this square with my faith?” Martin Luther said in document called “On the Freedom of a Christian” – we are “a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none and yet a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Luther’s inspiration for that was Paul’s words in I Corinthians 9:19 – “though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.”

I Corinthians 9 is about reaching non-believers with the gospel. But first we need to unpack what Paul means when he says “gospel.” “Matthew, Mark, Luke and John” are the church’s “gospels” – a noun derived from the Greek “evangelion” or “good news.” Bear in mind though, that no “gospel” existed, at least in written form, when Paul lived. What then was this “good news” to Paul? To him it meant being “yoked” to Christ, it meant as he said in Galatians 2:20 – “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

You may as well have asked Paul to stop breathing as stop “preaching the gospel.” “How though?” Just like you live it among others “in Christ” ... with freedom, which last time we said derives from a Greek word meaning “authority” – the same word used by the way when Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28 “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” but also with responsibility, knowledge and love. Paul begins applying this formula to his own people. He said to the Jew he became like a Jew ... to those under the law he became like one under the law. Which, remarkably, is who he was in the first place.

If I were to ask you to be a guest preacher some Sunday, or to lead a Bible study, I wouldn’t start by asking you to “become like a Christian in order to preach to Christians” now would I? Of course not. So, what is Paul aiming for here? Submission to others for the sake of the gospel. Let’s unpack that though. To the Jews of Paul’s time, both unconverted and those who had become believers, Jewish customs were still sacred. Again, consider meat sacrificed to idols. It just wasn’t done. I fear that one of the greatest challenges to the church today is that which we find in increasing severity among the wider culture - a lack of respect for one another owing to a lack of knowing what someone else’s values and traditions are.

“Tradition”, English author G.K. Chesterton said, “is giving voice to the most obscure of classes...our ancestors...it refuses to submit to the small, arrogant oligarchy of those who happen to be walking about.” Paul knew that. Paul was a Jew by birth and custom who insisted that faith alone in Jesus saves. But he took pains not to trample his people’s customs or mock them. He loved his people “for the sake of the gospel”. At Calvary we adhere to many of our Christian ancestor’s received traditions – the historic liturgy in our worship with its beautiful movements of word and sacrament being one example. We are part of church body, the NALC, that accepts the authority of scripture over all matters of faith and life, and for that we should be thankful. We are not then people captive to every new whim or trend. But...

The second category of people Paul refers to in this lesson are people who knew little of tradition. These people were called “Gentiles” – Paul uses the phrase “those outside the law.” But that does not mean they did not have beliefs. In those days, the very term “non-religious” was absurd – everyone had a belief system of one sort or another. Today, we take it at face value that there are all sorts of people for whom religion is at most a mild curiosity or else a mild irritant. Some consider religion sheer nonsense if not outright harmful to human progress. Is that what Paul is saying to us – he’d become like that - an atheist to win an atheist or a immoral person in order to win one?

No...but it would not surprise me a bit to hear Paul say; “I will do everything I can to understand such a person...to learn what they love and hate, fear and celebrate...even dislike about my traditions, so as to preach the gospel to them.” Lutheran theologian Paul Hinlicky wrote “we Christians in America need to understand that practically speaking, many people believe in nothing in the sense that there is nothing more valuable to them than their own selves...there is nothing out there to rely upon except their own selves, which is not very much at all.” Add to that people who believe only in nature and it’s observable laws, but as Professor Hinlicky observes, “nature makes a strange God, sending cancer and colds, droughts and famines while at the same time tantalizing us with lilies of the field and autumn harvests.”

But preach to them we must. Woe to us if we don’t preach the gospel...to them all! What then to conclude from this lesson? How to “become all things to all people” without losing our very selves in the process? Paul used an analogy from the sports world and so I’ll take a run at one. This is Super Bowl Sunday (sorry for bringing that up my dear Packer brothers and sisters!) The two teams taking the field later this evening will have studied one another extensively – in football that’s called the other teams “tendencies.” The athletes on opposite sides are some of the most fit human specimens on the planet (even if O-linemen look anything but). They trained for this moment for months - many of them decades. They know their task – they know their team’s plays, but they cannot be successful if they did not study and respect the other team’s too. Only one side will win because only one can. But they all prepared in order to win. Why else play?

So, how do we preach the gospel? By training ourselves with the gospel – learning what it means to be “yoked to Christ – to say of ourselves “it is no longer I who live but Christ in me.” Studying our faith’s practices and story and caring enough to learn what others believe, what their story is so that we might, for someone, show them how much better that story would be with Jesus in it. AMEN