

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

February 8, 2015; the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany

Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39.

All Things to All People

How many times have you and I heard it said, or said ourselves, “we can’t be all things to all people?”

In the context of church life, of our work and ministry as a parish, that is true, the sense that we cannot provide every type of program or activity that we might wish to provide.

Even if we were a huge church with say, 10 full-time staff members, we still couldn’t be all things to all people because then we wouldn’t be able to offer the sort of community where we can know each other well...and that is a great gift that we give each other.

In Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, we hear him expressing a desire to connect with everyone so that he can share what he knows about God with them.

Paul states: “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”

I wonder what you think of Paul?

Yes, there are a number of reasons to wonder about Paul or at least the writings attributed to Paul, that seem to be condemning, harsh, self-condemning.

But for today, rather than getting into all of that, I want to consider Paul as a person who had an experience of God, which changed his life and brought him to this place of wanting to be for people in such away as would convey the blessings of his experience of God through Christ in the power of the Spirit...convey the love of God.

We cannot be “all things to all people” in the way that phrase is often used in our society today.

For most often that phrase is used to mean doing more...doing everything everyone wants all the time.

That just gets us in trouble because in a sense it would be disingenuous...we don't really believe in all things; we don't really want to do all things.

As well, sometimes people seek to be all things to all so as to avoid conflict, so as to avoid saying, 'no' to anyone.

Was that what Paul was advocating?

No.

He was talking about something that I think we seek to do here at Holy Comforter, and it does not relate to “doing,” but rather it relates to “being.”

So often in our culture we get those two things confused, “doing” and “being.”

And as I think about all this, how we are and who we are for others, while it can involve what we do, is much more about “being.”

Being open, being loving, being forgiving, being inviting, being welcoming, being compassionate...to all.

Paul spoke of being like others so as to identify with them and connect with them so that he could share the gospel with them, the good news that he had received and wanted to pass on.

And while I do not pretend to think that Paul would agree with all that we are and do here at Holy Comforter...I do believe that we can hear these words for us today, in our time and in our context, and that the Spirit will help us discern the message God intends for us to receive.

I hear a call to openness and compassion for all as we share the grace that we have known through our relationship with God.

How do we do this?

We do it in so many ways.

Take our Adult Formation class...I posted on Facebook that the class, which meets every Sunday at 8:45am, is currently using a study entitled, "The Jesus Fatwah: Love Your Muslim Neighbor as Yourself; the specific topic for today was "Islam in America."

A Facebook friend of mine, someone who is also an actual friend, private messaged me saying that it is courageous that we are offering such a class, which surprised me.

I told her that I don't think we think of ourselves as courageous for offering this class...it is just who we are...we seek to be about the important topics in our world...we want to learn and grow in our understanding of others...we want to know God through them, how God is at work in their lives.

And we want to share the Gospel with everyone, not in the sense of converting them, but in the sense of being Christ to them through compassion, respect, and love.

As St. Francis is credited with saying, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if you must, use words."

We live the Gospel by *being* a certain way in the world...yes, that often results in us doing something, but it starts with *being*.

In our culture that so values doing, it benefits us to take time to reflect, and consider how the way we are, how we are being, is important and a gift to others.

Hear God thank you for how you are in this world--a person of compassion and peace, with respect for the dignity of all people.

Let's consider St. Paul again.

Paul was focused on making the "gospel free of charge."

Paul did not want to put burdensome requirements on people as the cost for becoming a Christian.

There was a debate during Paul's time about what people would be required to do.

One group believed that gentiles would need to go through some Jewish rituals before they could be Christian...such as circumcision for men.

Paul said no...nothing is needed...nothing except a desire to follow Jesus and join the community of the Way as it was known.

How is it that Paul came to be so focused on offering the gospel free of charge?

We just observed the feast day of the Conversion of St. Paul a couple of weeks ago.

You know...Paul, on the road to Damascus, has an experience of Jesus that changes his life...he knew he didn't earn it in anyway...far from it...Paul had been a persecutor of the Christians...persecuting them, in favor of killing them.

So Paul's experience of God, how Paul came to know God, meant everything...it determined everything...he received a gift, free of charge, and he wanted to give that gift, free of charge---Paul wanted to be part of God's way of giving this gift.

How we are in the world for God, says a lot about how we have known God, how we think of God, what our relationship with God is like.

And when I speak of knowing God, I don't mean that one has to have an experience like Paul's intense and sudden conversion;

Some ways of knowing might not even seem spiritual to some, though we know they are...such as in serving others by providing

for their needs, seeking justice in the world...certain things we do, help us know God and then help us to 'be' for God in our world.

One of reasons we come together week by week is to support each other in our faith, in our spiritual journeys, and to open ourselves to the grace of of God we find here.

Today after this service, I will be presenting a forum on spiritual direction, which is another way to get support for your spiritual journey.

Working with a spiritual director or in group spiritual direction, we take time to be, to listen for the Spirit in that time, and to come to greater awareness of the movement of God, the Spirit, in our lives.

Join me for the forum to hear about spiritual direction, my plans for group spiritual direction here, and the first groups that we will form...the first of what i hope will be many groups, as we are able add spiritual directors to lead the groups.

In today's gospel reading, we hear about Jesus doing many wonderful things, healing people, many people, freeing them from their demons.

Jesus did a lot.

But then he had to take time to pray...to regroup...to focus on God, in both his doing and in his being Jesus came to know God, his Divine Parent, and Jesus came to know himself and who he was in the world...two sides of the same coin.

We also need times of prayer and times set aside for spiritual practices that support both our doing and our being.

Because God is so amazing, so much more than we can ever know, there is always more to experience about God...always possible to go deeper and closer to God.

We set this time aside each week, we have time for personal prayer, we might decide that spiritual direction would help us...all of this is God's gift to us...all of this is God, seeking to be closer to us, even as we lean into God.

All of this is to help us know of God's love for us, and that determines everything.

I will leave you with words, a reflection, about falling in love with God, from

Fr. Pedro Arrupe, who served as the 28th Superior General of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, from 1965 to 1983.
As Valentine's Day is this week, as we are thinking about love, perhaps these words are particularly appropriate.

Nothing is more practical than
finding God, that is, than
Falling in Love
in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed
in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read,
whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you
with joy and gratitude.
Fall in love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.

Amen.

<http://www.jesuit.org/blog/index.php/2013/02/jesuit-father-pedro-arrupes-falling-in-love/#sthash.hYzW4Pcp.dpuf>