

All things to all people
1 Cor. 9:16-23
Feb. 8, 2009

I'll bet you have wondered. Wondered if God has called you to be a missionary. But how could you move to another culture and live eating strange food and putting up with strange insects and struggling with a strange language? You don't even like driving around Chicago because it is so different than what you're used to here. Why would anybody put up with all that trouble when they could much easier be a Christian here, much more easily preach the message of Jesus to people like ourselves?

But Paul does.

Follows Jewish customs when he is with the Jews.

Follows the laws of Moses when he is with those who do:
Cleanliness, eating kosher foods

Those who are not under the law are the Greek gentiles who can eat other foods. The weak are those who are putting too much value in rules rather than in Christ, but Paul doesn't argue, he goes along with their kind of faith, follows their rules even when its unnecessary, in order to help them know Christ better.

Does that sound like dishonesty, hypocrisy, lack of self identity?
Paul does not compromise his faith, he doesn't say one thing about Jesus to one group and something else to another group. This is not about his faith in Jesus, it is about his customs.

So he teaches how to do it in Romans 14: ff
"Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. They are responsible to the Lord. Let him judge whether they are right or wrong. Whatever you do, do it to honor the Lord. Each of us will give a personal account to God. Live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.

A nearby United Methodist pastor is Korean. He told us yesterday about the time he was new in the church, and how people there needed to tell him the local customs: when deer season and fishing season started, what the important sports teams were, how to celebrate Thanksgiving and Fourth of July and Christmas. They had to help him pronounce our words right, not to say Potomac when he meant Potomac. But he wanted them to teach him the customs, because he wanted them to know the gospel and not be distracted by pronunciations or customs.

Preaching the good news of Jesus Christ is so important that Paul doesn't let customs get in the way.
In Acts 20 he says he is prepared to endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

The Gospel John 3:16

Good news to the broken hearted, the sinsick, the sorrow worn. You are not alone.

It is so important that you hear the good news of Jesus Christ that I will use what ever music you like, whether I like it or not, in order to tell it. It is so important that you have a connection to God in Jesus that I will use whatever type of prayer works for you, whether it works for me or not. It is so necessary that you have Jesus in your heart that I will dress in whatever manner you think is right, whether it is my style or not. It is so right that you believe in Jesus that I will use whatever stories you like, whatever humor you like, whatever worship style, whatever songs help you receive faith and express it. I don't want any obstacle to get in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Which would be easy if all of you liked the same kind of music, the same styles of dress, the same level of thinking. If you all had come from the same church tradition, if you all had been Christians the same length of time, if you all knew as much about the Bible, if you were all the same age and had the same politics, it would be a lot easier to do church.

But you don't. So we provide a mix. We do it so various people can hear and believe the good news of Jesus Christ. So sometimes you get what I'm talking about and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you like the music and sometimes you think it's obnoxious. One of you hears a story that warms your heart and another one thinks the story is silly. So we ask you to be tolerant of what we do that is for the sake of somebody else. It is so important that they know Jesus, that we do something for their taste or understanding. It is so important that they be challenged to grow, that we have a sermon that answers their question, even though you don't have that question.

Each church has its own character. Some are young, some are old. We are a 160 year-old church with some families having been here for 6 generations. Unlike a new church, we are trying to meet the spiritual needs of a wider range of ages and spiritual stages. The narrower the range of ages and spiritual levels, the better a church can focus and meet those needs. The wider the range of ages and spiritual levels, the harder it is for a church to meet the needs of just one group, but the better it can provide people learning opportunities from each other in the mix.

Gospel John 3:16

Jesus came, not to condemn you, but to save you from anything that holds you back from a full life.

Paul wanted all to hear it. There is a man who is disappointed in the way he's lived, feeling he should have taken advantage of those opportunities. He should have studied when he had the chance. He should have apologized to that boss instead of losing that job. He should have paid more attention to that wife before she left. And now he figures it is too late for him to undo those hurts. Now the only way he can express his regret is through a sad country song. Paul would have sung that Hank Williams song and showed he understood. Then he would have told that guy that there is somebody who cares about his life, accepts him as he is and provides a way to get over the past and into a new life. He would have told him the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There's the woman who settled for a small life and now wishes she had done more. There's the girl who's been pushed around and wishes she had a reason to stand up for herself. Paul would have told them that a life with Jesus Christ in it can be full, worth something to others, and strong enough to stand up.

Paul wanted all to hear it. There is a man who's spent his life trying to get ahead of the other guys he went to Harvard Business School with. He put aside chances for love and friendships while he made money for his investment company. He got involved with risky mortgage packages, and when the housing market crashed, so did the company he spent his life for. Paul would have sat with him at the opera or the King Lear Shakespeare play while he realized his work was all in vain and then told him about the Jesus who died and came alive again to save him away from the death of his former life. He would have told him the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You are so important and valuable that God came to live with you. What is better news than that? You are so important and valuable that someone came, someone who understood your kind of life, to tell you of the love of Jesus.

That's the kind of church I'm working for here. One that brings the good news of Jesus to different people, different ages, different stages on the spiritual journey.

Immanuel Church is a United Methodist Church with an evangelical emphasis. That is, we highly value commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior and find God involved in our daily life. Immanuel Church proclaims this evangelical message in a way that leads to faith which is strong not only in church and community but beyond it as well. It gives faith that goes on to maturity.

More on this on a table in the entry [FAITH INTO THE WORLD](#)

Last Tuesday, some of the leaders of the church discussed the future direction of our church. We are working toward setting goals and ministries. I passed this letter out there, and we will discuss more a week after this Tuesday. You are welcome and invited to join the planning.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is so important that I will become all things to all people for its sake.

Immanuel church is a place where we tell it for all people.