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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year B: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

For this final installment of our sermon series on First Corinthians, we are going to dig into some of the practical and personal aspects of this morning's text. The apostle Paul has been a frequent target of critics who regard him as severe and unrealistic; today, Paul goes one step further by reminding us all of how wonderful he is (at least one could interpret portions of this morning's text as such). But before we get hung up on these less appealing aspects of Paul's personality, we need to identify the over-arching idea that ties Paul's thoughts together. So, we ask a question: "Why did he bother?"

If there's one thing you should walk away with from this sermon series, it is an appreciation for Paul's zeal for the good news of Jesus Christ. This, apart from God himself, was what inspired and motivated him throughout his life as an apostle. It allowed him to endure through threats to his life, persecution, and imprisonment. And if his estimation of himself seems a tad inflated, remember that he was one of those arrogant types who actually delivered. Think about it this way: You can talk about how wonderful you are if it's actually true, but if it isn't, you're misrepresenting yourself and selling someone a load of shoddy goods. Coming from a musical background, I've experienced hype with substance and hype without substance and everything in between...and it's not that difficult to spot the real thing.

There's an old baseball-related saying that goes something like this: "The guy was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple." This saying might get used in reference to someone who overestimates his own wonderfulness. Now, this isn't to say that this fellow didn't work hard to get to where he is, but he might not be fully aware of the advantages he had in comparison to, say, someone who grew up in a housing project. The guy who was born on third base benefitted from things he's not all that appreciative of -- like the finest schools, a stable home life, and a network of people in positions of influence to help him on his way. Does this mean that the fellow who grew up in a housing project is doomed to failure? No! But, success will be much harder to come by in comparison to the guy who was born on third base. In fact, if the guy who was born on third base thought he worked hard to get to where he is, imagine how much harder someone with none of his advantages would have to work!

The apostle Paul may have to be taken with a grain of salt when he makes some of his more grandiose claims. By the standards of the ancient Mediterranean world, Paul's background would have been relatively privileged; he could read and write when many couldn't, and, as a Jew, he was of the tribe of Benjamin, and acknowledged that he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews." His ancestor Benjamin was the last child born to Jacob and the only one born in the Promised Land. With his pedigree, it would be easy to imagine doors opening for Paul that wouldn't have opened for, say, the common fishermen who became Jesus' disciples. So when we read this morning's text, can we assume that Paul was positioned uniquely to accom-

plish things that many of his contemporaries couldn't? Possibly.

We've all seen those evangelists who put on a folksy, false modesty when, in reality, they live in mansions and enjoy the finest of everything. But they'll assure you, like Paul, that they're not in it for the money. Yeah, right. I believe that Paul, on the other hand, is genuine in his claims of "mak[ing] the gospel free of charge" (9:18b), as he does not seek compensation for his ministry, and with that, he believes that no price can be put on the free gift of God's grace. But if he did not accept compensation for his ministry, how did he support himself? There is no evidence to suggest, despite his education and pedigree, that Paul was independently wealthy, so he would've needed secular work, which, in his case, included tentmaking (or leather work). To this day, the term "tentmaker ministry" denotes the ministry of a church -- often a mission start -- in which the pastor receives little or no compensation from the church and has a traditional "day job" to remain financially secure.

Paul didn't collect a salary solely for charitable reasons, however. It might be nice to not have to bother folks about paying the preacher, but that's not all that's at stake here; there's also the matter of credibility. Tentmaking was, for Paul, a way of demonstrating his genuine commitment to the Gospel; he is, in fact, so committed that he refuses to accept payment for his ministry. The idea, then, is that people will respond positively when they are assured of this. One might speculate, as well, that Paul would've used the rapport he built with his fellow tentmakers

in the service of evangelism. Nowadays, we might see non-tentmaking clergy doing something similar in various kinds of civic engagement, through clubs or serving on boards of directors and the like.

An interpreter from today, however, might see Paul's life as a recipe for burnout. As clergy, in particular, have seen their vocations become more and more "professionalized," we're seeing concepts like "work-life balance" come into regular use. And that's not all bad; burnout is real and isn't something a community of faith should foster -- whether among clergy or laity. So, I get a little concerned when Paul makes extravagant claims like "I have become all things to all people" (9:22). Indeed, it is precisely when you try to be all things to all people that burnout rears its ugly head.

Furthermore, wouldn't you have to be granted a certain level of privilege to even attempt to be all things to all people? Surely, as he writes in our text today, Paul uses his Jewish heritage as a means of bolstering his credibility among Jews; we read, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win more Jews" (9:20a). Could a non-Jew pull off something like that? No, but Paul could because of his ancestral faith. It is well-documented that Paul's familiarity with and conversancy in Jewish ritual and theology gave him an "in" that automatically made him more convincing than some average Gentile. The fact that Paul made the leap from Judaism to Christianity himself made that leap less frightening for Jews, too.

Incidentally, his own people presented a number of challenges for him, however...particularly around questions of becoming Jewish prior to becoming a Christian. Some thought that, yes, one must first become Jewish, but Paul said no, it is not necessary.

Paul maintains, too, that he was able to go the other way -- from Jews to Gentiles. He writes, "To those outside the law I became as one outside the law" (9:21a). I'm not entirely sure what this all entailed (did he eat a pound of bacon to prove his point?), but he employed a strategy used by missionaries forever, which involves adopting local customs and thereby endearing yourself to those you want to convert. Moreover, the fact that Paul himself was a convert makes the prospect less threatening for others.

But a word that is frequently used -- and problematic -- in Paul's letters appears again here; it is slave. He writes, "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them" (9:19). I have seen translations that have attempted to soften the language a bit by substituting servant for slave, but that diverts attention away from the reality of slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world. Yes, there were slaves, and while slavery wasn't necessarily race-based like it was in the United States, it was still an identified class of people who were denied certain rights under Roman law. There was one way out of slavery, however, and that was to purchase one's freedom, so the phenomenon of legally freed slaves in the Roman Empire was a reality, if not terribly common.

Now, how would an actual slave in Paul's time react to a claim

like "I have made myself a slave to all"? How could Paul, from his standpoint of relative privilege, ever think that he could identify as one of the least privileged in society? Surely, among slaves themselves, he could come across as condescending and patronizing. How could he even have the faintest clue as to their struggle? Today, the equivalent would be a white person saying to a black person, "I know how you feel," because, no, you don't. But might it be possible to cut Paul a little slack because, after all, he endured much persecution -- and even imprisonment -- for his faith? That may be about the only way out of this conundrum, as well as acknowledging the difference in context (in this case, slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world versus slavery in the United States).

The question of "why did Paul bother" has hopefully been answered in a few ways this morning. On one level, he did what he did "so that [he] might win more of them," to use his own words. On another level, it wasn't for the numbers or even the enhancement to his resume, but instead for the sake of the Gospel itself. Think of it this way: You've been given something that has so profoundly and positively affected your life that you have no other option than to tell others about it. When this is the case, you're likely to be compelled to take on things that would, in the eyes of some, appear to be monumental tasks (not to mention a recipe for burnout). But that's where the inspiration of the Holy Spirit meets the perspiration of preaching the Gospel. You're not doing it on your own; indeed, you have a great cloud of witnesses accompanying you...prophets and martyrs and apostles (Paul included)

and saints and, of course, Christ himself, without whom there would be no Gospel.

And when you consider that free gift of God's grace -- granted to all who have been grafted into the Body of Christ -- as it has transformed you from darkness into light, from despair to hope, and from sin to redemption, how might you respond to this work of God in your life? Surely, if it's that good, it's worth telling others about. And, like Paul, you might not even need to get paid to do it. (Don't get any ideas about trying that with your rector, though...)

Honestly, we don't have to think of this all numerically, either. Paul wrote, also in First Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (3:6). Sometimes we need to get our preoccupation with numbers out of the way, tell the story, and let God do his work. When and where God wills, the growth will happen, spiritually if not numerically. Beyond that, there's only one thing that we can do, which is share the good news of Christ in word and deed. Invite your friends to church, and if they don't want to join us in person, have them watch us online. Have the zeal of the apostle Paul and adapt his creativity to getting the word out. And, most of all, remember that you are God's beloved children -- grafted into his family in the Body of Christ -- and called to demonstrate how much God loves you in your love toward others.

Amen.