

WGUMC February 8, 2015 "All Things to All People"
I Corinthians 9:16-23

Everyone will tell you that you can't be all things to all people, but here in First Corinthians that is exactly what the Apostle Paul is trying to be. To the Jews, he is a Jew, in order to win Jews. To the Gentiles, who are outside the law, he becomes as a Gentile to win Gentiles. In this way, he becomes all things to all people so that he might by all means save some. [9:20-22]

I'm not convinced that even the Apostle Paul could be all things to all people. But history shows us that the Gospel has been all things to all kinds of people. Over two thousand years, the Gospel has been taken to every corner of the earth, translated into countless different languages, and adapted by scores of different cultures. As circumstances have changed, the Gospel has changed in order to remain the same. No matter what language it speaks or what culture it wears, two thousand years later the Gospel is still good news to those who hear it.

We can look back and see how the Gospel is beginning to take different shapes even in the Book of Acts. In Jerusalem, Peter preached to Jews in the language of Hebrew Prophecy. In Athens, Paul preached to educated Greeks in the language of philosophy. In the heart of the beast, imperial Rome, the Gospel spoke in the language of *God's* reign and *God's* authority. And so it spread. Along the way, to those who were confused about Christ, the Gospel spoke the language of doctrinal purity. When no one could speak Latin anymore, Martin Luther made sure the Gospel spoke in the language of Germany. In early industrial England, as more people were being put in mines and factories and treated like machines, John Wesley preached the Gospel in the language of the heart and personal piety.

Wherever it goes, the Gospel listens to the heart and learns the language of the people and grows richer and fuller with every encounter.

It was sixteen centuries before the Gospel made it to Korea and it didn't come to full flower there until the twentieth century. But when the Gospel encountered Confucianism, it acquired a new language and new gifts to give to the Christian world.

Now there are some characteristics of Confucianism that made Korea fertile soil in which to sow the Word of God. For one thing, Confucianism is more of an ethical system than a religion and there are many similarities between the ethical teachings of Confucius and that of Jesus. Early converts to Christianity connected the Chinese concept of *Tao*, which is the "way" or "path," with Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Another key aspect of traditional Confucianism is the emphasis on learning. Koreans want to make their lives better and they are looking for the key to successful living. So when Christian missionaries came to Korea with knowledge and new

ideas, they made many converts. Protestants arrived in the late 19th century. They not only brought Bibles, but they also began building schools and Koreans flocked to them. There are 293 Christian schools and 40 universities in South Korea today.

Because they are so thirsty to learn how to live, Korean Christians took to the Bible. Shijung Shim is a young Korean woman, doctoral student and candidate for ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church. She currently pastors a Korean congregation in Fremont. She tells me that Koreans are very disciplined and dedicate a lot of time and energy to reading Scripture. According to her, "It doesn't make sense to many Koreans to say that you are a good Christian and not invest much time to pray and meditate on the Word of God." So one of the gifts that Koreans give us is a challenge to learn more about the Word and then let it shape our lives.

But that isn't the only gift they give us. Providing opportunities for education was not the only way that

missionaries spread the Gospel on the Korean peninsula. At first, the missionaries were suspicious of Korean attitudes about family. They condemned the shamanistic practice of ancestor worship because they considered it idolatry. But then they realized that they could use the Koreans' fierce loyalty to family to make converts to Christianity. All they had to do was persuade the patriarch and the rest of the family would come to Christ.

And it didn't stop with the family. Korean Christians take to heart Paul's words: "an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" [1 Cor 9:16] And they gladly proclaim their new-found faith in the community.

It has proved to be an immensely effective evangelism strategy. Christianity has about 10 million followers or 29% of the population in South Korea today, and it isn't because of foreign missionaries. In fact, Koreans are now sending out

missionaries of their own and more missionaries than any other country but the U.S.

If you talk to church leaders in this country, they are in awe of South Korean churches, one of which has 800,000 members. [Yoido Full Gospel Church, a Pentecostal Church in Seoul] I was at a leadership conference a few years back, and the presenter was talking about church growth. Our basic problem, he said, is this: the average Methodist in South Korea invites two people to church every week but the average Methodist in the U.S. invites one person every 38 years. Do the math. Do you think we could learn something from our Korean sisters and brothers?

My young Korean friend told me that there's a third gift that Korean Christians give us. Along with spending time studying Scripture and knowing how to invite people to church, they have an amazing practice of prayer. Koreans have a lot of pent up prayers because they have suffered through long years

of persecution. Historically, the country has been repeatedly invaded by several imperial powers: China, Japan, and Russia. Then there was the Korean War and also a long military dictatorship. So Koreans have what Andrew Park describes as "frustrated hope...resentful bitterness, and the wounded heart." [Andrew Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*] Koreans call this feeling *Han*. And it is *Han* that they try to release in their prayer. So when Koreans gather to pray, they get it all out, they let it all go. In a group they pray individually simultaneously. Out loud. And it is loud. It is intense. It is very powerful. This kind of fervent prayer is called *tong-sung-Ki-do*.

Imagine praying that way first thing in the morning. Every morning. Back when most Koreans were farmers, they were used to getting up before dawn and praying. A hundred years ago, when Japan invaded Korea, outlawed Christianity and tried to force everyone to practice Shinto, Korean Christians would climb up into the mountains early in the morning to pour out

their hearts to God in prayer. Today there are many prayer mountain facilities in South Korea where people still go to fast and pray.

But you don't have to climb a mountain. You can simply go to church. Not all Koreans are farmers anymore, but Korean churches typically open early every morning for prayer. In Korea even teenagers go to the morning service before going to school. At Green Korean UMC in Fremont, the church opens at 5:45 am every day.

It's comforting to know that someone is praying at that hour and I don't have to. That's the beauty of the Gospel, isn't it? Because it is all things for all people, none of us have to do it all. We can be sure that some Christian somewhere is doing it for us. I would love for you all to join a Bible study and delve deeply into God's Word in a way that would change your life. I would be thrilled (transported to the third heaven) if you

invited two friends to church every week. And if you wanted to pray before daybreak, I'd give you a key to the sanctuary!

The key to successful living as Christians is not that we do the Gospel just as Koreans do, but that we let the Good News live in us and become the Good News for Willow Glen. The important thing is that we learn to preach the Gospel in our own language and learn ways to touch the hearts of people right here. Al and Dorothy Mauseth did that in their day. How can we be the Al's and Dorothy's of today? How do we connect people with the Word in our little world? How do we invite people into God's love in Willow Glen? What is the best way to help them learn how to pray? When we can answer these questions not for South Korea but for this part of Santa Clara County, we'll know what Paul meant when he said that he had become all things for all people. When we become ourselves, we will be all that we need to be. And the grace of God will do the rest.