

WGUMC September 4, 2016 "The Many Faces of Paul"  
I Corinthians 9:1-2, 19-23

The worse advice I could give to anyone is: "Be all things to all people." That expectation has killed more clergy and more churches than you know. Of course, no one person, no church, can be all things to all people and we only create havoc in our lives and set others up for disappointment when we try.

So how are we to take a guy who tells us that he has become all things to all people so that he might save some people? We can't just write him off, because he wrote a good part of the New Testament. We're dealing with Saint Paul, of course. And I'm hoping that if we knew more about where he came from and what he was about, we could understand better what he meant.

We are starting in on a study of Paul that I've been avoiding for a very long time. I'll tell more about that next week. But before we dig through his letters and wrestle with his words, I thought it would be a good idea to peek into his

personal profile. He doesn't have a Facebook page and he didn't write a biography, but he does drop hints here and there. And so we can create something of a résumé that will show us the many faces of Paul.

We have to start with Paul the Enforcer. When we first meet Paul, he is known as Saul. He is in Jerusalem, cheering at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. [Acts 7:58-8:1] Next he goes house-to-house to drag Christians off to prison. And after that he makes plans to do the same in Damascus.

Paul is a Pharisee and an enforcer of orthodoxy. In these early years, he reminds me a bit of the last pope. Before he became Benedict XVI, he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and chief enforcer of Catholic teaching. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he initiated investigations into American nuns and other progressive Catholics because he suspected them of straying from canon law. So he earned the title, "God's

Rottweiler." Well, Paul must have thought of himself as God's Rottweiler.

But something happened on that road to Damascus. God's Rottweiler became God's Golden Retriever. Paul the Enforcer became Paul the Believer. There on the road, Paul was blinded by a bright light. He heard a voice. It was Jesus, asking him why he was persecuting him. Persecuting Jesus? I thought he was persecuting his followers. But you see, Christians are the body of the living Christ, so when you persecute Christians, you are persecuting Christ.

Now Jesus didn't say, "Follow me," as he said to the twelve disciples. He didn't say, "Believe in me." He didn't say, "Worship me" or "Serve me." Jesus simply told him to get up and go into the city and he would be told what to do.

Something life-altering happened in that moment, because Paul did it, without a word, without a question, without a demand for an explanation. This is what we call instantaneous

conversion. [Acts 9:1-19] In this story, we see a glimpse of Paul, the Mystic, the one who has this blinding vision of Christ and who later will talk of being caught up in the third heaven with Christ [2 Cor 12:2]. From here on, Paul considers himself and all true believers to be "in Christ." For him, the spiritual goal is to be in mystical communion with Christ.

On that experience of communion, Paul stakes his Apostleship. It's a bold thing to do. After all, he wasn't one of the original twelve. He did not follow Jesus and share daily life with him. He was not there when Jesus rose from the dead and gave them authority to go and make disciples of all nations. [Matt 28:18-19] And yet Paul has the audacity to claim that he is an apostle just like them.

Our reading today has him asking, "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?" Obviously, people are questioning his credentials and he has to defend them. And defend them he

does, even to the Twelve. In Acts and in Galatians we get the impression that there is a bit of a power struggle between Peter and Paul. [Acts 15:1-35; Gal 2:1-14] It is finally decided that Peter will be the Apostle to the Jews and Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Peter and Paul were a pair, like Woz and Jobs. Even though Jesus said that Peter was the rock [Matt 16:18], Paul was the one who really laid the foundation on which the church was built. So you could say that Paul was the founder of the most successful start-up of all, Christianity. Jesus came to save the world, not to start a new religion. Paul was the one with the organizing and marketing genius to start up the Church.

There were no garages back then, so Paul the Entrepreneur started churches in houses. He had a system: he would go into a city and begin preaching in the synagogue, until he got kicked out, and then some pious family would welcome him into their home. Those who liked what they heard

would start meeting there. Paul would stay for a while, then go on to the next town. This, my friends, is how a small business becomes a multinational corporation. And this is exactly how Christianity is spreading like wildfire in China today.

Though Paul did not have any of the media tools we have these days, he still managed to keep connected to small groups of Christians scattered around the Roman Empire. And he did it all through snail mail. Paul the Communicator wrote letters, sent words of encouragement, dispensed advice, answered questions, settled disputes and issued warnings, all with pen and papyrus. These were the high tech tools available in the first century, but not everyone could use them. Believers had to find someone who could read and then gather together to hear what Paul had to say. And what did Jesus say? "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." [Matt 18:20] Christianity began in community.

It was good that Paul could read and write. That way he could communicate with other Christians while in prison. Paul often came into conflict with the authorities, and he was thrown into prison many times. In fact, in or out of jail, Paul liked to think of himself as a prisoner for the sake of the gospel. Here he is boasting about being in all kinds of danger: "danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked." [2 Cor 11:26-27] I think he left out walking five miles to school, waist-deep in snow, uphill both ways.

Yes, Paul the Prisoner boasted about his many persecutions. But sharing in the suffering and death of Christ made it possible for him to share in the resurrection of Christ. We'll talk more of that in the coming weeks.

The last face of Paul that I want to show you today is the face of Paul the Pastor, the one who writes: "I remember you always in my prayers" [Rom 1:9]; "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus" [I Cor 1:4]; and "how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus." [Phil 1:8] This is the voice of Paul the Shepherd, caring for the sheep.

But shepherds also have to carry sharp sticks to protect the sheep, and so Paul knows how to speak the truth in love. To the quarreling Corinthians, he says, "This is the third time I am coming to you...if I come again, I will not be lenient...Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith...I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down." [2 Cor 13:1-10]



Maybe I need a stick! No, what I need is a conclusion to this sermon. Today, I have shown you some of the many faces of Paul: Paul the Enforcer, Paul the Mystic, Paul the Apostle, Paul the Entrepreneur; Paul the Communicator; Paul the Prisoner; and Paul the Pastor. And it is my guess that at least one of these Paul's will speak to you.

Perhaps that is how best to understand how Paul can be all things to all people: by being a big enough personality to offer something to everyone. Paul is a complex character. He is a mass of contradictions. It's hard to know what to make of him. But I invite you to listen, really listen, in the next several weeks, so that we can train our ears to hear the Word of God sneaking up on and slipping through the words of Paul to speak to us. That is my hope and my prayer. Amen.