

Sermon: A Story Worth Proclaiming

Year B, Epiphany 5

[Isaiah 40:21-31](#); [Psalm 147:1-11, 20c](#); [1 Corinthians 9:16-23](#); [Mark 1:29-39](#)

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Rev. Catherine Merrill

Sermon

You just read from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Just curious, how many of you think of Ricardo Montalban on TV selling Chrysler Cordobas in the 1970s with "soft Corinthian leather"?

Corinth was in the south of Greece. The original occupants of the city were conquered by the Romans and thrown out. The Romans rebuilt the city, filling it with immigrants from Rome, mostly soldiers and traders. It became a vibrant trading city, with goods coming and going from all over the world. Not only were there trade goods from all over the world, there were many, many religions.

A booming trading city on an island off the mainland. The original inhabitants kicked off the land. Repopulated with immigrants. Diversity of religions. Does that remind anyone of any place? Manhattan came to mind.

Anyway, Paul went there to preach the gospel, to convert as many people as he could to the gospel of Jesus the Christ. At the time Paul was preaching, Christianity hadn't fully separated from Judaism. But it was definitely a different thing, a faith that had practices that were different from the Judaism that was active around the Mediterranean.

Part of what we read today made pretty clear sense, but the first bit and the last were kind of confusing, so I thought maybe we'd slow down and look at those more carefully. Because they change the way we can understand the bit in the middle.

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel! OK, that sounds pretty clear. Sounds like Paul thinks he should talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ. He doesn't think he has any grounds for boasting if he does it, because he's going to get into trouble if he doesn't. How many of you had that moment as a kid or with your own kids where dishes got put away and someone wanted a round of applause. Nope, no applause, you just get yelled at if you don't do it.

For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. This says something about attitude. Clearly he thinks he has no choice, he's supposed to proclaim the gospel. But if he does it willingly, there's a reward. And even if he doesn't do it willingly, he still has to do it. Next week we'll ask the kids to think about Jonah. He didn't want to go preach, indeed he ran in the other direction. God redirects him and he ends up in Nineveh. He's still a sour puss once he gets there. We're going to ask them if something might have been different if he had just done what God asked in the first place, and done it with some cheerful grace. We listen to stories like Jonah and we think about how the whole city of Nineveh was saved. But maybe God's whole point of sending Jonah wasn't to save Nineveh. Given what little effort and charm Jonah put into his gig as a prophet, God might have sent just about anyone if Nineveh was that ready to repent. Maybe the point of sending Jonah was to save Jonah, was to give Jonah a chance to try something really hard and be heroically successful.

Back to Paul in Corinth. *What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.* He just said that

if he went willingly, he would have a reward. Here's where he's trying to explain what the reward is. He says that in doing his proclaiming, he makes the gospel free of charge. Now we can understand that. Paul does his proclaiming thing and the Corinthians don't need to buy the book. But most people back then couldn't read. Plus, unless you were crazy rich, you didn't buy books, you copied them yourself.

So let's look at that sentence again: *that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.* If Paul is proclaiming the gospel, is giving the gospel away, somehow that act is giving away something that Paul had a right to. It turns out that the gospel says Paul has a right to be paid as a proclaimer of the gospel. He's reminding the congregation at Corinth that he had the right to expect payment, but he didn't ask for it.

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. Here, Paul's using *free* in two senses, the way we do in English. First off he isn't charging anyone anything. Secondly, he's under no one's control. And yet in spite of being a completely free person, he makes himself a slave to everyone. All of you who are parents, even to grown children, think about that. All of you who are someone's children, even if you are the grown children, think about that. All of you who are married and working with that space in a marriage, think about that. Doesn't it feel familiar? We are completely free, yet in our freedom we have linked our whole lives to the lives of other people.

Then Paul rattles off a whole list of people: the Jews, those under the law, those outside the law, the weak. He wraps up by saying *I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some.* How many of you grew up in a household where someone said, "you can't be all things to all people"? Yet here is Paul saying that he did just that. And he did it not to save all of them, but just to save some of them.

He wraps up with a real kicker. *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.* Wait, what? Proclaiming the gospel for free is cool, indeed he says he's supposed to do it whether he wants to or not. But if he's proclaiming the gospel to all these different kinds of people, isn't it so *they* can share in its blessings? It's like he's saying that only by proclaiming the gospel to other people can he really share in the gospel's blessing.

He proclaims the Gospel to the Jews as if he was a Jew. And he was a Jew. In other places he says he was the most devout of Jews. But now that he's proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, many Jews would say he'd left the faith, especially because he's eating and worshipping with non-Jews.

There were people who were attracted discipline and humility of the Law of Moses but didn't or couldn't convert to Judaism. They lived as if they were under the Law of Moses but they were really outsiders. The Jews didn't think much of them and the society around them which worshipped many gods didn't think much of them either. These people living under the Law were outcasts everywhere.

The people who lived outside the Law of Moses were just regular gentiles. They had no idea where Jesus was coming from, no familiarity with the traditions of Judaism, and yet they heard something in Paul's teaching. For someone who had grown up as devout a Jew as Paul had, a man who persecuted Christians for blasphemy, that was an awful lot of tradition to forget. It's

hard to step outside all the assumptions and norms your culture has and connect completely with people from well outside.

Then there were the weak. This could mean weak in so many ways. Physically, spiritually, intellectually. Paul was none of these things. For all the other groups, Paul says he became “as a Jew” or “as someone outside the Law”. But for the weak, Paul says he became weak. Think of the weak in our society: the children, the elderly, the mentally ill. What must Paul have done, as strong a man as he was, to become weak?

He does all this so he might win them, the Jews, those under and outside the Law, the weak. The gospel doesn’t win them. Paul does. And he knows it. From the very beginning, he says he has no grounds for boasting. And he doesn’t and he knows that too. He wins them into a relationship where they too are free to take on the obligation to proclaim the gospel. The gospel is a tool in human hands to bring people closer to God. A tool we are free to use. When we proclaim it, regardless of what happens to the people we proclaim it to, we share in its blessings.

Paul was all things to all people, he said. But logically, you can be both a Jew and someone outside the Law. And you certainly can’t be all those things and weak too. What Paul did was connect all those people’s stories with the gospel.

Think back on today, Ricardo Montalban, how alike Manhattan and Corinth were, doing the dishes, how being someone’s kid or someone’s parent is both completely free and total enslavement. Think further back. How many of you thought of the first hymn we sung as *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*? How many of you recognized it as a Civil War song? It is a song from our history as a nation. It is part of our story, whether our people arrived in the country after 1865 or regardless of the side our people fought on. Think of what Barbara Alves shared.

Our faith requires us to partner with the gospel, to join in proclaiming the gospel’s story with our own personal story. We can’t proclaim the gospel until we know not only our own story, but the stories of others. Knowing those stories isn’t enough. We have to connect our stories with the stories so thoroughly that the two interconnect thoroughly, that we become as the other, that we become weak enough to be vulnerable to the other.

Why? Why isn’t enough to read it? Or, fine, memorize it. Or, ok, memorize it and apply it our own lives. Why do we have to get all tangled up with other people’s stories too? Think about what the kids are learning about Jonah. Maybe God didn’t send Jonah to Nineveh to save Nineveh. Maybe God sent Jonah to Nineveh to save Jonah.

It isn’t enough to read it and keep it to ourselves because that’s putting some kind of limit on God. We’re saying that the gospel works solely by itself, not in partnership with the people for whom it is blessing. The whole point of reading from Isaiah today was to remind us that no matter how much we think we know about what God is up to, we just don’t. We can’t look at the world, and make a prediction about the God who set it up. We can’t make a prediction about God except that God shall renew our strength when we serve God’s ends, when we partner with the gospel to proclaim it. When we entangle our stories with other people’s, we may become weak or even vulnerable, but we shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint.