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Sermon for February 5, 2012

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year B

Scripture Text: I Corinthians 9:15-27

In Service to the Gospel

As Paul draws the first part of this digression to a close, he does so by, once again, employing a dizzying array of examples and metaphors. From a seemingly blurted out statement that he would rather die than make use of any one of the vast array of rights and privileges that are at his command to the invoking of images of athletes preparing to compete in the every other year Isthmian Games, Paul once again drives home to the Christian faith community in and around Corinth that what is really at stake is not what the members of the Corinthian house churches can gain from the Gospel of Grace that has been proclaimed to them and witnessed to them in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ; rather it is how they are called into the service of that Gospel of Grace.

As you will recall from last week, the vast majority of the portion of text we looked at dealt with Paul's naming and claiming of all of the rights and privileges he had as not only a Christian and an apostle but, more specifically, *The Apostle* who brought forth the communities of faith in and around Corinth by his preaching and teaching. We explored Paul's claim to not only have as many rights and privileges as anyone in the Corinthian communities of faith but also his proclamation that his rights and privileges far exceeded anyone else's; a theme that will surface in more than one of his other letters to other communities of faith around the ancient near east. And we explored that regardless of what he could claim, Paul would none-the-less forgo any or all of his rights lest he impede the gospel in any way.

So keeping to that theme we begin today where we left off last week with Paul proclaiming, once again, that he has no intention of invoking any of these rights including the right to earn a living as an apostle to the point that if it were ever to be the case that he would begin to earn a living as an apostle he would rather die because he will not ever let anyone deprive him of his ability to boast. And we here and now are left with a statement that seems to make little sense, for it seems that what Paul is saying is that he will not accept a paycheck for the ministry he does because to do so would prevent him from boasting; and all we can ask is boasting about what?

In the day and age of Paul, it was not unusual for one who was engaged in ministry or philosophy to have a patron – one who would provide them with a living so that they could pursue their vocation. This patronage system was often adopted in the early Christian communities of faith as a way to assist those who were called to move about the area preaching and teaching as they went and establishing new communities of faith in the areas they visited. However, as was the case in these patronage positions, those who received their living from one of these wealthy patrons often became beholden to them to such a degree that they were no longer really free to pursue their studies or proclaim the message that they were called to proclaim if it was deemed, by their patron, to be counter to their wishes and desires. So for Paul, in dealing directly with the Corinthian Communities of faith, he writes to them that while it would be perfectly normal and even expected that he should be assisted by one or more of the wealthy folk of Corinth who were members of the Christian house churches there, he would have none of it lest they attempt to domesticate him and the gospel to their ends. Given the risk that accepting a wage from them carried – that they would attempt to have him stop challenging them on their claims to be free to do whatever they wanted – Paul makes it abundantly clear that they will never get that opportunity because he would rather die than accept pay for proclaiming the gospel to them and to all. And that is what he means by his statement that no one will deprive him of his ground for boasting; for his ground for boasting is none other than the gospel of Jesus the Christ. He will not accept any payment for the grace that he proclaims that comes from God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ and that is freely given to all who would pause long enough to accept the gift.

So it is from that point that he then continues on. Having declared himself free to proclaim the gospel he states that he is none-the-less bound to the service of the gospel and can do nothing else but proclaim the good news of Christ to all who will listen. But in order to do so he will become for the sake of the gospel a living example of the gospel itself. He will become like whomever it is he meets so that there may be no barrier between himself and those he will preach to and teach. In other words like the gospel itself, like the grace of God shown to all through Jesus the Christ, Paul will meet those he encounters where they are rather than expect them to meet him on his terms. So whether they be persons of deep and abiding faith or whether they be persons who are so new to the idea of faith expression that they don't even know where to begin, Paul will meet them and be with them all for the purpose of proclaiming to them a gospel story that they can grasp right now and then grow into greater understanding as they learn more about what Paul is talking about. So far from being the chameleon who will become whatever you want him to become, as the statement "I have become all things to all people," often is misinterpreted; what Paul means is that while firmly grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, I will do everything possible to share that grounding with others in the very same way that it was shared by Christ himself by going to others and meeting them where they are in whatever condition they may be in and from that place calling them to a new understanding and a new life all while accompanying them all along the way.

And then to complete his thought, Paul invites all of the Corinthian Community of faith to join him in this service to the gospel. While not letting go of making himself the model for them to follow, Paul exhorts the Corinthian Christians to now take seriously their own callings to proclaim the gospel as well. Likening them to athletes training for the Isthmian Games that would soon commence just down the road from Corinth, Paul calls on the Corinthian community

of faith to show as much perseverance and self control in their lives as do the athletes. In other words, just like Paul is willing to forgo any or all of the rights he might have as an apostle just so that he will not ever be a barrier to another as they learn and grow in the faith, so does he call the whole of the Corinthian community of faith to do the same. And while one who wins one of the races or events at the games would do so for a wreath made from wilted celery, Paul calls on the Christians at Corinth to understand that what they strive for, in living lives that point to Christ alone and that provide an unfettered avenue for others to follow in the faith, is of far greater value; for what they strive for is the recognition that they have made it possible for others to understand the love of God as shown to us and all through Jesus the Christ.

And in that friends, comes our challenge as well for we too have been called to proclaim the gospel of Christ to any and to all and we do so best when what we say and how we live are congruent.

Amen.

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