**22nd Sunday after Pentecost – Year B – October 28, 2012 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on 1Corinthians 9:7-12, 19-23 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“Be all things to all people, so that you may win some for Christ.”**

*Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? 8Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? 9For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 10Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. 11If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. 19Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. 22To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. NIV*

When I was at the Seminary one of our professors told our class the story of when he was a little boy. He always wanted to be a pastor. His father was a pastor. He thought it would be cool to be a pastor because he observed his father meeting people wherever they were in life. Then he became a pastor and realized how hard it was. He had his friends he liked to hang out with, his music he liked to listen to, did things he liked to do. He couldn’t always do those things in order to meet people where they were in life. He had to step outside of his comfort zone to relate to people in order to share the message of Jesus with them. The Apostle Paul talks about expanding our comfort zone to serve those in our community and in our own church with the gospel. Today he teaches us to be all things to all people, so that by all possible means we may win some for Christ.

Corinth was a bustling town located in southern Greece. The Apostle Paul established a Christian congregation there and then spent 1 ½ years with the people in Corinth. But it had been a while since he had been at the church and there were some problems – which is why he had to write this letter. Some men in the church were leading new Christians to doubt Paul’s authority as an apostle. They scrutinized everything he had done at the church in Corinth – from what he ate and drank to the people he hung out with and his salary. Sounds like a presidential campaign, doesn’t it? Paul had to defend his right to do the things he had done in Corinth.

In vs19 Paul made the claim that he was free. As an apostle, he was free to do ministry the way he wanted to and no one could dictate to him how to do his job. But… he also had the freedom to, as he said, “enslave himself to all people.” Not only did Paul deprive himself of the things he was free to do, but also what he was comfortable doing – all for the sake of preaching the gospel and winning souls for Christ.

One of the things Paul was free to do was receive a salary from the congregation in Corinth. Jesus had told his disciples that those whose job it is to preach and teach ought to make a living from preaching and teaching. A congregation has the responsibility to support their pastors’ physical needs so that they can focus on preaching and teaching and administering the sacraments. Paul took a paycheck from other churches. But he did not in Corinth. There were men who worked as “traveling preachers.” They would fly into town, preach, make a little money, then skip to the next town. Paul did not want to give the impression to the people at the church in Corinth that was just another traveling preacher. So he did not receive a salary. In fact, he took a job on the side to support himself, in addition to all the work he did as a pastor.

Paul’s accusers pointed this out and said, “You know, you get what you pay for. Paul is preaching for free. What does that say about the value of his message?” But the apostle proved his apostleship by not taking a paycheck. He proved that he wasn’t greedy for money. He was greedy to tell people how much Jesus loved them. And if taking a paycheck built a barrier between his message and his people, he was willing to give up something he had a right to receive. And Paul told them, “I will put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” Paul put himself into their sandals, so-to-speak. He saw himself as one of them in order to find some common ground and allow a door to open and share the good news of Jesus with them.

In vs20-22 Paul said, “To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews.” Paul already was a Jew – according to his nationality, but no longer his religion. Jews practiced eating kosher – no pork, no shellfish – they practiced circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath day rest, and other festivals and holidays. Paul wasn’t required to follow these customs, but when he was around Jews he did. He refrained from pork, he observed the Sabbath all to find common ground with the Jews in order to share the message of Jesus with them. If some festival or event violated the truths of Scripture, Paul refused to participate. But he became like the Jews to win the Jews over for Jesus.

Who are the Jews today that we could become? Aren’t they the Jews who live among us today? They, just like the Jews in Paul’s day, do not have Jesus as part of their salvation. They, too, still believe that their observance of the law and the ceremonies will get them to heaven. The same goes for Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witness… they do not have Jesus as their Savior from sin. Are we willing to be all things to them in order to win them for Christ? Do we love them enough to step out of our comfort zone and get to know their customs and traditions in order to find common ground?

In the summer I play tennis with a devout Muslim on a regular basis. During the month of Ramadan when he has to fast, we adjust our playing time. During some matches we take a timeout so he can remove his shoes, kneel down and pray. Then he shares some dates with me, we drink water and then resume our match. Did I do anything to violate my faith in Christ? Absolutely not. But if I was unwilling to accommodate his religious practices, and did not educate myself on his religion, would there be an opportunity to share the message of Jesus with him? Are we willing to love people enough to step out of our comfort zone to find common ground and perhaps win some for Christ?

I believe the same goes for new church members and guests who join us for Bible study. When we make snide comments about those who are Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal or other religion, those folks who may have those religious backgrounds may not be inclined to return to hear more about Jesus, because we just put up a wall for them.

Paul continues… “I became like those not under the law to win those not under the law.” Those “not under law” were the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people, who were not required to obey the Old Testament ceremonies and festivals. They were unchurched people. They were unfamiliar with any kind of church traditions and ceremonies. Paul knew when he was around Gentiles that it was a not a good idea to practice his Jewish customs – even though he was free to do so. Because the most likely place an unchurched person will feel out-of-place is in church. They are thinking, “Where do I go? What do I do when I get there? How will I fit in?” Are we willing to love unchurched people enough to step outside of our comfort zone for them and remove any obstacles that may hinder them from hearing the gospel when they come to our church? Are we willing to perhaps rethink the “that’s-the-way-we’ve-always-done-it” mentality and make changes were changes are necessary? By no means will we change our message! The truths of Scriptures will always remain the same. Are we willing to think of our guests first so that they can hear the good news of Jesus?

Paul continues… “To the weak I became like the weak.” These are the people who are considered weak in society, the insignificant, the ones on the fringes of society – they may not be the best dressed, not make as much income as the majority of people, they may be the hospitalized, homebound, may not have as high level of education as us, or the same rank in the military that you do. Are we willing to take the time to associate with these folks in order to find common ground and reach them with the good news of Jesus?

Finally, Paul says, “I become all things to all people.” That means to the people in our community – getting to know who the people in our community are and finding out how where they are in life and how we can reach them with the gospel. That means to the people in our own congregation. As Paul says, are we willing to “put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel?” This does not mean that we put up with sinful attitudes – divisive behavior, false doctrine, bickering and fighting within the church. But are we willing to step outside of our comfort zone with our own members? Could that mean forgiving someone who has offended you? Could it mean that you apologize to someone you have offended? Because if we’re not willing to love each other that way, we may be keeping folks away from hearing God’s Word because of our behavior towards them.

Are we willing to love and to do whatever it takes to remove any obstacle that might hinder someone else from hearing the gospel? If we are not, then we are only enslaving ourselves by our own sins. Our desires and our sinful pride and selfishness enslave us and do not let allow us to be free to be all things to all people. We need someone to set us free.

Jesus said in the Gospel this morning, “I did not come to be served…” but by right he was entitled to have the people of Israel bow down to him as he walked along the roads, didn’t he? He was the King of kings! He had come down from heaven and taken on our human flesh to serve us. “I came to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) Jesus became all things to all people, didn’t he? He was the one who was accused of hanging out with ex-prostitutes, tax collectors and “sinners.” He was the one who had all sorts of sickly people hanging around him, too, because he cared for them. He was the one who scolded his disciples when they kept children from coming to see him because he wanted children to come to him. He was the one who became like the weak – his own disciples – who didn’t always “get it.” He was patient with them and instructed them so they would understand. He became all things to all people – a perfect, self-sacrificing service – the payment he gave to his Father to set you free from your sins.

But in order to “be all things to all people” Jesus also had to completely identify himself with you and me – as sinful human beings. The Bible tells us that Jesus became our sin. (2Corinthians 5:21) Your sins of selfishness, racism, unwillingness to forgive or to apologize – Jesus became those sins. And the Father punished him for those sins and put him to death for those sins that he became. This death is also part of the payment Jesus made to his Father in heaven. And the Father accepted this payment. This means that your sins of pride and self-centeredness no longer belong to you. They are not a part of you anymore – for Christ became those sins to set you free - and you are free!

Jesus has set you free from your sins so that you can be all things to all people – and that is what you are. You are all things to all people. When we see how much the Savior loves us we will love others the same way and do whatever it takes to remove whatever obstacle we may be putting up so that others can hear about the love of Jesus, too. This means that our main goal in life is to save as many people with the good news of Jesus as possible – because that’s Jesus’ goal, too. Being all things to all people means that I am willing to step out of my comfort zone – it means that I am willing to give up doing things that I like to do, associate with people that I may not usually. I am willing to cross cultures and get to know their traditions. “Being all things to all people” means that I will not change the gospel. I will not change or alter the truths of Scripture, but I will change my attitude for the sake of sharing that unchangeable, eternal, life-giving Word.

And the rewards? Paul says that he sacrifices so that he may share in the blessings of the gospel. The rewards far out-weigh the sacrifice! To see someone hear how much Jesus loves them, to see the Holy Spirit working faith in their heart, and then to share together with that individual the joy that we have in Christ, and to know that when that person dies, they will be in heaven with their Savior, and with us – how cool is that?

So our challenge this week… think about this: Who can I reach with the gospel? What do I need to do, to change, to stop doing, to make sure that someone can hear how much Jesus loves them? What obstacles do I need to break down so that I can find common ground? How can I be all things to all people, so that by all possible means I may save as many as possible with the gospel?

I pray that the Lord will lead you to an answer as you pray on this and study God’s Word this week. Amen.