

It is Super Bowl Sunday unlike any before, not just because one of the teams is for the first time ever playing in their own home stadium, but because of COVID sniffing dogs, cardboard cut-outs in the stands, health professionals as honored guests, and relatively few actually attending in person. I will still be watching, however, because it is the Chiefs and I remember far too many years when Kansas Citians held their heads low when play-off season came around. I would wear my sweatshirt around KC and smile when someone proclaimed, "Go Chiefs" and do the warrior chop (now considered politically incorrect). Our eyes would meet and we'd both say in unison, "Maybe next year!" I confess I am not big on sports, but still find joy in the big game, the ads, and occasionally switching over to the puppy bowl for laughs. However, I do understand the game better than one 3<sup>rd</sup> grader who was on a field trip and was talking non-stop to his teacher on the bus. He enthusiastically shared about his life including his fondness for dogs and football. Then he boasted, "My uncle played for the Green Bay Packers." "Wow," said the teacher, "What position?" "I'm not sure," he replied thoughtfully, "I think he was a... golden retriever." Certainly we can admit there are lessons to be learned from football such as if you watch too much, you can wear out your "end zone" (sorry!). Author George Will noted while watching one game where the team seemed to spend an excessive amount of time in huddles, that football combines 2 of the worst things about American life: violence punctuated by committee meetings. Finally, in life as in football, you won't get very far unless you know where the goalposts are.

That final assessment is critically important to the author of our letter to Corinth, Paul the apostle. Those goalposts are clear and defined as Paul seeks to reveal to his listeners the

accessibility and receptivity of the gospel for all people. Our text is rather cumbersome, hard to understand and embrace as it currently reads, making people just want to skip over it for more straightforward passages of Paul's. Paul's goal is aimed at winning as many people as possible to the gospel and he will adapt his behavior in whatever way necessary to achieve that end. However, that doesn't mean he changes the gospel's message, only the way in which it is presented. Our context for this passage is that Paul has been challenged by some of the Corinthian people because he was not one of the original 12 disciples and spent his early years persecuting Christians. So he has gone on the defensive trying to prove he is worthy enough to preach the gospel. In that vein, he presents himself as a conciliator, a sort of peacemaker who seeks to overcome the cultural and ethnic divisions of society in order to bring people of all sorts into one community of faith. Paul tries to relate to people where they are, not giving up his own integrity, but respecting the otherness of the Jewish community, Gentiles, the weak, indeed "all people" in order to help them feel more at home with the gospel. He is attempting to help them recognize from their own perspectives how the gospel offers hope. It is a worthy venture which seems so desperately needed, even now.

Another story out of my Kansas City days comes from an inner city church that was doing an after school program for their community's children. Their worship attendance had sharply declined but they didn't give up hope and started this service program that provided food, games, Bible stories and music. They would have up to 60 kids every day having fun with the many activities. One day a mother came up to the young minister running the program and asked, "Are you the one in charge?" "Yes, ma'am." "Well, my son's in this program." The minister responded, "Well, we're glad to have him. We're having a great time and I hope he is

as well.” “Yes, well he can play the games, and he can eat the food, but I don’t want him listening to any of those stories.” “We just get them out of the Bible – they’re just Bible stories.” “Well, I don’t want him listening to them.” “Why? We’re not trying to indoctrinate him – we’re just telling Bible stories.” “Because my son has now gotten to the point where he’s coming home, thinking he’s as good as anybody else in Kansas City, and you are setting him up for bitter disappointment. I don’t want him to hear those stories anymore.” The young minister was dumbfounded as he was just trying to do good.

Like in Paul’s time, there are just some folks who are not receptive to the message Jesus taught and that is sad. Paul exemplifies for us the importance of taking people where they are, finding what makes them tick, getting to know their lives, their paths to this moment, and what they need, before just barreling through with a “one size fits all” message. I am one of those people who hates those signs on hangers in clothing stores – one size **does not** fit all, I don’t care how you make it! If that were the case, my petite 90 lb. daughter Ivy and I would have been sharing clothes all the time, but it isn’t happening. The Gospel was never meant to be a uniform message dictating everyone to think alike, act alike or be alike. As General Patton once said to his staff, “If we are all thinking alike, somebody isn’t thinking.” It is exactly this insistence on uniformity, that our church has the right message and the only way and everybody else is wrong that has sadly led people away from the Christian faith.

Best-selling novelist Anne Rice announced some years ago that it was this practice that led her to officially “quit Christianity.” Anne was raised Catholic, left the faith at 18, described herself as an atheist for most of her life, then returned in her 50’s, only to leave once more concluding that she could never truly belong if she was expected to be “anti-gay, anti-feminist,

anti-birth control, anti-Democrat, anti-secular humanist, anti-science, anti-life, and pro quarrelsome and hostile.” That cost of membership wasn’t worth it, so she opted out. However, she went on to say that her faith in Christ is central to her life. She is still an optimistic believer in a universe created and sustained by a loving God. But following Christ does not mean following His followers. Christ is infinitely more important than Christianity and always will be, no matter what Christianity is, has been, or may become. As a minister of the gospel, it gives me great pains to say that some followers of Christ have too often misrepresented the message to support their own agenda which perpetuates such extremes as what we saw on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Paul seeks to teach us that the diversity from which people encounter the gospel, which means good news, can be enhanced not diminished. For those who are Jewish, the gospel helps expand understandings of the law; for those who are enslaved, the gospel gives new dimensions to being freed; for those who come from non-faith backgrounds, the gospel builds on the expansiveness of God’s love; for those who are weak, the gospel leads in directions of strength. With such diverse backgrounds, unique personalities, and values, God weaves a new and creative tapestry through which the gospel faith is nourished. Participants in that faith submit ourselves in various ways to the cultural structures and limitations of the people we hope to reach in order to more freely share the good news. Through it all, therefore, we lean upon and encourage each other for the sake of the gospel, as Paul states, so we can be a partner with it.

One size doesn’t fit all, but the message of the gospel offers hope for all, no matter who, what or where you are. That is because the uniformity we all do share in is our humanity, first and foremost. Rear Admiral Thornton Miller, once the high-ranking chaplain who served at

Normandy on D-day, retells the story of that fateful day. He shared of going from soldier to soldier as they were screaming, crying and dying and he tried to say a few words of comfort and pray with each of them. Upon being asked why he did such a thing, he answered, "I'm a minister of the gospel." Another asked, "But didn't you ask if they were Catholic or Protestant or Jewish or Muslim or even atheist? Did you just... I mean, if you're a minister and all..." Rear Admiral Miller simply responded, "If you're a minister, the only question you ask is, 'Can I help you?'" I would expand that to say to you, "If you are a follower of Christ's, the only question you ask is 'Can I help you?'" By doing so, we learn what it means to love God and love people, which in my understanding, are the definitive goalposts of life. In loving God and loving people, we help others recognize from their own perspectives how the gospel offers hope and how creation might be saved by all possible means. May it be so with God's grace, Amen.