

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! 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. 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.

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. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

“To the Judaeans I became a Judaeen,” Paul writes to the church in Corinth, “that I might gain Judaeans; to those subject to the Law, as one subject to the law – while not being subject to the Law – that I might gain those subject to the Law; to those without the Law... to the weak...” and finally “I became all things to all persons that in every case I might gain some of them.”

At first glance, Paul might appear to be describing a slight identity crisis. He changes depending on his environment. He allows personal relationships to mold his behavior. Even some of his politics and opinions shift depending on who he's talking with.

There is a book published in 2013, still in print, that is so filled with staggering brilliance that it took me 12 years to write. I met with an amazing array of people to do the research including folks specializing in an aspect of human maturity called “ego development.” And the models and instruments used for exploring ego development provide some fascinating insights into what Paul is describing in his letter.

Now, we frequently misuse the word “ego.” We often say, for example, that someone has a huge ego if they are arrogant or can never admit their mistakes or who insist on getting their way at all costs. In psychological

circles, those characteristics actually describe a person with a very small and fragile ego that requires constant defense and bolstering. Ironically, they often exaggerate their self-importance and become absorbed by fantasies of unlimited success. They are over-sensitive to failure, and are prone to swings between self-admiration and insecurity.

Psychologists who study ego development are interested primarily in answers to the question: "Who do you say that you are?" Ego development involves questions of identity. And the larger the healthy ego, the more it contains.

The ultimate ego is, of course, God whose self-described identity is "I am that I am." Absolutely everything that *has* being is included in the God that also transcends all beings. In fact, recognizing that God's awareness is beyond measurable limits is what causes the psalmist to say "Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God!" The Holy One of Israel speaking through Isaiah says: "To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?"

And so, contrary to popular thinking, a larger, more inclusive sense of who we understand ourselves to be is good!

And the chameleon-like behavior that Paul describes in his letter is not the result of losing or abandoning who he is. It is the result of an expanding, more inclusive sense of who he is.

There is a clue captured in one crucial phrase. Paul writes: "For, being free from all, I enslaved myself to all." Being free from all means he is not *defined* by his religion or his achievements; he is not identified by his gender or his sexual orientation. His ego is not bound to his economic, race or social status. These are all *aspects* of Paul. None of them define who he considers himself to be.

And the space opened by this liberation allows Paul to meet people where they are, trying to see the world as they do so that he can be of service to them. That's the responsibility that comes with the freedom that Christ grants.

Liberation from bondage to everything but Christ compels us to come beside each other. Liberation in Christ is not the sacrifice of a stable sense of our unique presence as an interdependent, living entity. True liberation is not the same as detachment. Detachment is evidence of an underlying problem

or a chosen aloofness that separates us from each other out of total disinterest. Both lead to suffering, but liberation in Christ never involves a lack of love or compassion.

Practicing freedom in Christ means being present to and mindful of each other. Practicing liberation in Christ means allowing our sense of well-being to rely increasingly on our awareness of the presence of God in ourselves and each other. We practice until our joy is no longer defined by anything other than God.

In Christ, we become free *from* all and free *to serve* all.

Our relationships become more and more like the relationship God offers to each of us: each focused on the other without losing their distinctiveness. Mutual, abiding relationships effortlessly flowing with love, kindness and regard. We learn to meet each other in our unity without sacrificing our otherness.

In this state, if we proclaim the good tidings, as Paul writes, no boast belongs to us because we have set our smaller egos aside to move into our freedom in Christ. We learn to be present to each other with open curiosity, mutual regard and unconditional love, all while resting in an inner sense of peace and an expanding awareness of our distinctiveness and unity with the Great “I am that I am.”

This kind of liberation has been compared to the non-stick coating on a frying pan. It doesn't affect the pan's ability to heat, it doesn't stop the pan from doing a good job or even, depending on how attuned you are to your pans, from enjoying their work. Once the work is done, nothing sticks. Everything that is not the pan just slips away.

Isaiah and the psalmist sing praise to the mighty God who sustains the cosmos, strengthens the weak and restores the fallen. And Paul writes about the work – the roles – that God gives us to do in God's acts of creating and recreating.

God works through each of us to serve and revitalize the creation around us.

In Mark's intimate and specific Gospel story, having just freed a man from the grip of an impure spirit, Jesus and the four newly recruited disciples return to Simon and Andrew's house. Simon's mother-in-law was laid out

there, stricken with fever. Jesus raised her up and took hold of her hand. The fever left her and she waited on them.

Now, if we are attached to gender roles or identified by our dedication to breaking stereotypes or perhaps even self-defined by some personal wounding, we might hear this story with some frustration. And it is true that people have used this brief, simple story to reinforce the notion that a woman's role is not to lead but to serve.

There are many ways to embrace this moment and each, more than likely, says more about us than it does about Simon's mother-in-law or Jesus or Mark. If we encounter this story with our hearts and minds opened to the presence of God, free from all and enslaved to all, we might notice that this woman is never dismissed as somehow inferior to those she serves. She is not assigned some lesser role.

In fact, her *private* experience counterbalances the *public* experience of the man healed of an impure spirit. God has come near to her with strength that knows no boundaries of gender or any other kind. God, through the presence of Jesus who trusts his essential identity in the great "I am that I am," makes the woman whole by lifting her and taking her hand.

And her loving and ultimately appropriate response is to serve, to wait on Jesus and the other people in the room, just as the angels did in the desert. God, through Jesus, has made her *whole* not simply healed of a fever, but whole in right relationship with Christ and with those around her.

If you want to mature into your most expansive self in the God who "sits above the circles of the earth," start by meeting those around you exactly where they are and *how* they are. Choose to wait on them with compassion; empty yourself in service without attaching your identity to the results.

Do it for the sake of the gospel so that you may share in its blessings.

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