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## *Can We Be All Things To All People?*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Epiphany 5 – Year B**

*“I have become all things to all people,” said Saint Paul,  
“that I might by all means save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:22)*

I have heard the phrase over and over again, from marketing sessions to strategic planning meetings (which we in the church often call evangelism meetings or mission meetings!) From planning sessions to mission statement meetings. It is the first thing out of the mouths of advertising specialists. It is the first thing consultants say!

They say, “Well, you know, you can’t be all things to all people.”

“Don’t try to do everything,” they say. “Be focused. Know your limits. You can’t be all things to all people.”

Yeah, I get it.

I have heard it. I understand what they mean. If you try to be all things to all people, you will lose your point. You may even lose your identity. You may be pulled this way and that.

Yeah, I get that.

But, here’s my problem. I didn’t grow up with strategy consultants and marketing specialists. I grew up with the Bible. I have spent my adult life with a mission statement already given to me, that we are to be the Body of Christ in the world, reconciling the world and each other to God.

And I grew up with these striking and challenging words of Saint Paul, in First Corinthians, chapter 9. He says, quite precisely, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” If Saint Paul could say that he had become all things to all people, shouldn’t we try to say that, too? I think so.

I also grew up learning from eastern religious traditions. Maybe some of you remember the old eastern parable of the six blind men and the elephant. It is worth repeating today:

Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. They could hear, and they could touch, but they could not see. One day, they heard everyone saying, “Hey, there is an elephant in the village today.”

Now, they had no idea what an elephant was. They had never heard of such a thing. “Let’s go to where it is,” they said. “Even though we will not be able to see it, let us go and touch it, feel it.” All of them went to where the elephant was. Every one of them touched the elephant, and every person began to describe it.

The first man touched the elephant’s leg. He said, “Hey, an elephant is a pillar, like a post or column.”

“No, it’s not,” said the second man. This second man was touching the elephant’s tail. “The elephant is like a rope.”

"Oh, no!" said the third blind man. "The elephant is like a thick branch of a tree," He was touching the elephant's trunk.

The fourth man said, "No, no, no. The elephant is like a big hand fan!" What was he touching? He was touching the elephant's ear!

"It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man, who was touching the big belly of the elephant.

"No, you're all wrong," said the sixth man. "It is like a solid pipe." He was touching the tusk of the elephant.

They began to argue and argue with each other. Each man insisted he was right. The elephant is like a column. No, a fan. No, a solid pipe. No a wall. No, a rope. No, like the branch of a tree! They were getting angry with each other.

Just then, a wise man came by, and he noticed the argument. He stopped and asked them, "What is the matter?" They said, "We cannot agree to what the elephant is like." Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, "All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because each one of you touched a different part of the elephant. Actually, the elephant is like all those things. The elephant has all those features which you all touched, but you just touched different parts."

So goes the parable. It teaches us that God is bigger than any of us. Each of us knows God, but each of us probably knows only a particular aspect of God. No one, no one of us, knows everything about God.

This reality can be frustrating when we try to pray together, or serve God together, or speak about God together.

Some of us are touched by God only through folk music, in the sounds of guitars and drums. Some of us have religious experiences through country music. Others of us touch God through 19<sup>th</sup> century organ music, or the glorious Anglican choral tradition.

Some of us touch God when there is lots of incense around, and gold vestments, and icons and altars galore. Others of us find our deepest spirituality in a sparse, empty meeting house, with nothing inside but benches. Some of us find God outdoors, in nature. Some of us serve God without using words at all, but by touching the poor, those in prison, the hungry. God touches some of us from the right, and God touches some of us from the left.

Some of us claim that there are ninety-nine names for God. Surely, God is known in a thousand ways, and in a thousand tongues. And Christ is known in a thousand different faces, without ceasing to be the Christ.

That is the power of Christ, and that is the power of the gospel. And, dear friends, one of the chief names we give ourselves as the Church is "Body." We say we are the "Body of Christ."

I understand that no one of us can do, or be, everything. But, together, we can, indeed, look something like all those different features of the same elephant. Together, we can be something like the full Body of Christ, and all things to all people, in order that we might save some.

Listen again to what Paul said at 1 Corinthians 9:19-22:

*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.... To those under the law I became as one under the law.... To those outside the law I became as one 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...*

By ourselves, we cannot represent the fullness of God. But together, "together," is a different story. When we are together, black and white, young and old, liberal and conservative, Super Bowl football fans and college basketball fans, something happens.

Together, we contribute our various experiences, we offer our various touches of the greatness of God – and together we approach something of the fullness of God. Alone, the six blind men had incomplete knowledge of the elephant. It wasn't wrong knowledge; it was just incomplete. When the six blind men added their experiences together, then it was that they had a fuller sense of God.

The Christian Church is meant to be the totality of our individual touches of God. No one person of us, by ourselves, is Christ. But, together, we are. Together, as a body, we are the Body of Christ.

Consider this experience of Holy Eucharist, in which we receive and become the Body of Christ. When we come up for communion, in a few minutes, every one of us will be thinking of something a little bit different from the other.

Some of us will be thinking about where we are going for lunch. Some of us will be looking for our mother's hand. Some of us will be noticing what another person is wearing. Some of us will be thinking about a person who is ill – or maybe someone who died recently.

Some people might even be thinking about today's sermon. Or the choir's anthem, or one of the scripture lessons. Some people will be thinking of the Boy Scouts, or the Super Bowl, or the homeless, or what faces us at work this week.

None of these thoughts is wrong. None of these touches is wrong. They are just incomplete, all by themselves. In fact, every one of those thoughts can be holy, if we bring them to God at this altar. Every one of those thoughts represents a place that needs the Body of Christ.

Holy Communion is the offering of all we have at the altar. Our money and gifts, for sure – but also our worries and our hopes, our daydreams and our reflections, our prayers and our laughter. They are all holy when we offer them to God. They are all holy when they are ways that we touch God. When we are together, this Holy Communion is all things to all people.

Maybe, by ourselves, we cannot be all things to all people. But we sure can be Christ to all people, and I believe that is what Saint Paul meant. In faith, we lose our selves so that we can be something else. We become the Body of Christ, serving in a thousand individual and different ways.

Christ—who is the incarnate energy of God in every person—Christ, appears in all sorts of people. Jesus the Christ is all things to all people, so that he might save some. And together, we can be that presence; we are the Body of Christ.

Amen.