

Have you not known?

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Isaiah 40: 21-31

I Cor. 9: 16-23

Mark 1: 29-39

²¹Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

Of course we know. Of course we have heard. We know who God is and we know what God does. God is the creator of all things and the master of history. And by this then we know our own place in the world.

But then Isaiah springs this image on us: You are like grasshoppers. We may have been remembering with the Psalmist that we as humans are created a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8). But Isaiah says no, you are but grasshoppers, and if you think that means you are so small you can hide from God, think again.

We are grasshoppers? This is kind of a depressing word to receive when we are supposed to be in a season of hope, in a new era when we imagine new possibilities, when old wounds are being healed. Some people even dare to talk about this as a post-racial period.

On the other hand this is also a time of high unemployment, people losing their homes, global climate change, wars and conflicts in every corner of the world, poverty, AIDS, the orphans and widows we always have with us. Maybe this is a word of comfort. God is in control and we grasshoppers just can't see the whole picture.

But this is not our only word from scripture today. We also get the short selection from Paul to the Corinthians. If Isaiah calls us grasshoppers, Paul says we are to be like chameleons.

¹⁹For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰To 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. ²¹To 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. ²²To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.

How do we make sense of these two texts? Is there any way to make them mesh? At first glance they seem to be giving a mixed message. Isaiah says we are powerless as the grasshopper, but Paul seems to say that we have more power than we know. Be all things to all people and the blessings of God will be yours.

I heard a science report on NPR this past week that reminded me just a little bit of the scriptures for this morning (see ScienceFriday.com). Maybe you caught this story too. A British scientist has discovered that there is a parasitic caterpillar that pretends to be an ant. After the caterpillar hatches from the egg and eats its way to ant size, it drops from the bush into the ant world.

This is the dangerous part because apparently not all red ants are equally perceptive. Some can detect intruders and some can be fooled. The caterpillar makes itself smell like the ants. If the caterpillar is picked up by the perceptive ants and taken into the ant nest, they figure out they have been fooled and they kill it. But if the ants that are less discerning find the caterpillar and carry it to their

nest, it begins making the sounds of the queen ant. And it is treated like the queen. It becomes all things to all ants.

The duped ants feed the caterpillar. The caterpillar goes on singing and smelling like royalty and it gets fatter and fatter. The ants are so devoted to this phony queen that if there happens to be a food shortage (as there often is in the wild) they feed the imposter their own eggs and young. The caterpillar continues eating and eating until it is time to become a chrysalis. Even as a chrysalis it keeps up the queen ant song until it emerges as a butterfly and flies off to live above ground.

This caterpillar imitates the ant and becomes like an ant for its own purposes, its own self-preservation. The motivation is quite the opposite of Paul's. Whereas the caterpillar becomes like an ant to save itself, Paul becomes like a slave to save the slave. He becomes as a gentile to save the gentile. Paul's chameleon act is not to save himself but to save others. This is where humans differ from the rest of the animal world. We, of course, want to save ourselves but we can make choices to help and save others.

Paul acts as if this is easy, to become as a slave even when he is not, to self-identify with the gentiles though he is a highly trained Jew. This is easier read in scripture than lived in the 21st Century. Even in this congregation where there is not a whole lot of diversity in terms of race, economic or educational levels, those of us who are cradle Mennonites can sometimes appear as an exclusive club. There is the unspoken expectation that others will become Mennonite the way we are Mennonite.

What would happen if we were more like St. Paul? What if we who are cradle Mennonites became like those who choose Anabaptism for its best tenants? What would happen if we held onto Anabaptism but shed the foods and family connections. How might our faith community change? Are we ready for that?

Or maybe Paul isn't talking so much about becoming like other people as much as he is talking about following the words of Jesus. Maybe this is a kind of servant leadership he is demonstrating. Is Paul taking Jesus literally when Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all." Mark 10:43-44

I admit to some discomfort with this language. This is a Christian tradition, even a foundational principle: servant leadership, and many of you here embody this. But there must be something unnerving about this command to become like a slave, when one is descended from slaves. I wonder what this kind of leadership sounds like to those whose great, great grandparents were born into slavery or those whose ancestors were brought to this soil in chains only to be turned into slaves.

It seems like Paul's attempt to identify with even those who are enslaved is an effort to build genuine relationships with those who are discarded, who are overlooked as people of worth. His identifying with others allows each person to see their own value and consider sharing that for the good of the whole, even as a way to free their spirit, if not their body.

Servant leadership is a great idea. But how does one live a lifetime of that? How can one sustain this for years at a time, “being all things to all people?” Jesus is the model. So how did he do it? How did he keep listening and teaching, helping and healing?

One of the keys is in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel.

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

This particular morning, according to Mark, is after a busy Sabbath of casting out unclean spirits from a man in the synagogue, and then healing Peter’s mother-in-law. Then

³²That (same) evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons...

The next morning he gets up early, it is still dark, and he goes away to a deserted place by himself to pray. Of course Simon and company come searching for him and inform him that everyone is looking for him.

This is not an isolated incident for Jesus — searching for space to be alone so he can pray. It seems a small detail for the gospel writers to include but over and over again in the gospels we see Jesus trying to get away to pray. He is still at it, even on the night of his arrest, going off by himself to pray though he does want his disciples to stay nearby and pray as well. (Mark 14:32) There must be something about prayer and meditation, taking time away, which re-energizes a servant leader.

Maybe Paul is just more extroverted than Isaiah and Jesus. Where Jesus needed to get away to prepare himself for more preaching and healing, where Isaiah recommends waiting on the Lord to renew strength, Paul goes out to proclaim the gospel one more time, this time to the gentiles or the slaves.

But whether we are introverts refueling ourselves with solitude or extroverts energizing ourselves with relationship, how do we continue in the work for a lifetime? How do we keep on as servant leaders, building relationships and spreading the good news of hospitality, healing and love?

Unfortunately there are no easy answers. We still walk a fine line between knowing that we are part of something larger than ourselves, call it God if you like, and having a responsibility to pass that good news on to others. It is the inner journey and the outer journey. It is worship and work. And it is always a balancing and integrative act. If we keep the good news to ourselves expecting to be fed over and over again like the caterpillar, we are not true to ourselves as God created humans. But if, as the ants, we feed and serve others even at the expense of ourselves and our offspring, we lose our strength. We are killing ourselves.

And so in the end we are left to live into this strange tension:

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. (²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.)

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

May God give us strength, patience and love as we worship and work together in the community of faith.