

Message for Sunday, February 4, 2018
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
Betsy Headrick McCrae
Scripture passage: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

God's chameleons

Sammy is into reading books these days. One of his books is about a chameleon. The chameleon is green to start but he keeps changing color. When he's up against something orange, he turns orange. When he's up against something yellow, he turns yellow. He adapts himself to his surroundings. He blends in.

As I reflected on the passage that Brenda read for us from chapter 9 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, that's the image that came to me, a chameleon. "To the Jews I became as a Jew," Paul writes. "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.... I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some." That's it, I thought. Paul is God's chameleon, adapting himself to his surroundings, taking on different colors depending on the circumstance, blending in.

Paul chooses to do this – and suggests that it is something we can choose to do as well – so that people can truly come to understand in their own contexts, the good news that in Jesus God has come near and that salvation is offered to everyone, no exceptions. Paul wants to offer this good news "free of charge." In other words, he doesn't want his own rights and desires, his own definitions and expectations to get in the way. He doesn't want to put on any unnecessary restrictions. He wants the connection that folks make with God to be genuine and real on their own terms, in their own way, speaking to their own needs.

Paul *chooses* to do this, to put himself in others' shoes. He could do otherwise.

He could stand on his pedestal and preach from a distance. Proclaiming the word of God, yes, but all the while keeping himself apart, guarding his pedigree, protecting his reputation, building up his ego and self-esteem, being in charge. He could do things the “right” way according to his religious tradition. Folks would understand this. It makes sense. It’s the way things are usually done.

But Paul realizes that his newfound freedom in Christ is not about him. It’s not about maintaining his own power. It’s not about creating a following for himself. He cherishes his freedom, but he knows that it is not a personal thing. He is free because Christ lives in him. We are free because Christ lives in us. This God-given freedom means being able to choose to do what is right even if it’s counter-intuitive according to our culture. It means not being trapped in a small world focused only on ourselves. True freedom allows for making choices that might seem foolish in terms of one’s own short-term standing, but which serve the long-term well-being of others. True freedom allows us to put our self-interest aside and to instead make choices which point others to God and build up the community for the good of us all.

We are free to be God’s chameleons. Entering fully into the lives and life situations of others without always thinking about how we will change things or fix things or make them like us. Instead we can let go of our preconceived ideas and blend in. We can trust in the knowledge that Christ lives in us. That’s our undergirding reality. We are free from the pressure of trying to figure it all. We know that somehow the Holy Spirit will be at work and the light of Christ will shine. We are not in charge, after all. We are but channels. God working in us and through us. What freedom that brings!

This morning our daughter Rita is speaking at her church in Lancaster, PA. This

week she and I were in communication as she prepared what she will say. Her theme is that following Jesus means making a conscious decision to do things differently. She will be sharing with her congregation some things she learned about servant leadership in her work as a therapist and administrator at Community Services Group in Lancaster.

Aha! I thought as she shared this with me. This is what I'm talking about as well.

Servant leadership is all about freely choosing to put one's self-interest aside and instead focusing on others in order to build up the community and foster the well-being of all those involved.

You'll find the description of servant leadership that Rita shared with me on the back of the joys and concerns insert in your bulletin. Don't think that because you're not in an official leadership position this doesn't apply to you. It applies to all of us and to all of our relationships. As we read through these points, think about this in terms of being God's chameleons.

1. Servant leaders begin by listening. We seek to understand and learn first, along with being honest in our responses without passing judgement.

2. Servant leaders seek to empower and promote the growth of others. Servant leaders believe that people have intrinsic value beyond simply what they produce.

3. Service comes first. Servant leaders put the needs of others before their own.

4. Trust is built. When this happens others will feel safe around us and will not be afraid to make mistakes. We grow when we grow together.

5. Humility and empathy are important. Servant leaders assume good intentions in others. We will not think less of ourselves, but rather think less about ourselves.

And finally, 6. There is a sense of community and stewardship. As servant

leaders we are all custodians of our community, we all are responsible for caring for it.

I suggest that you take this description home with you and think about the ways you can practice these things in your own life. I found this helpful this past week as I visited with Yazmin, who is struggling with so many difficulties. I tried not to come with too many preconceived ideas, but to be open to however the Holy Spirit is working in her life and that I, by being there, listening, trying to understand, am somehow being a channel for God's life-changing love. May this be the case.

I'd like to end this morning by sharing a story which I think is a good example of what servant leadership might look like in an unlikely place. This story was written by Gabriel Furshong, a contributor to Writers on the Range. It was published in the January 28 issue of the Denver Post. Mr. Furshong writes:

After a year of deepening political division on race and immigration, the defeat of a white four-term incumbent by a black former refugee in Helena, Montana's capital city, continues to draw national and international attention. In November, Wilmot Collins defeated Jim Smith by 338 votes, becoming the state's first African American mayor.

Collins arrived in the U.S. in 1994 after fleeing a brutal civil war in Liberia. He enlisted in the National Guard six months after his arrival, and he will retire later this year. He said he decided to run for mayor in part because "people think refugees come here looking for a handout, but no, we want to make a difference."

Not long ago, a huge crowd gathered at his inaugural celebration to hear his thoughts on the unprecedented victory. But instead, they heard something else entirely.

Collins surprised his audience by refusing to explain how the race was won or to

speculate about what his victory might mean. He did not describe what was broken or how he would fix it. He also didn't engage in the finger-pointing that's become typical of so many political exchanges today. Instead, he ceded the stage to his daughter and his mother.

Jaymie, his daughter, looked down at Collins from the risers. "You're gonna get tired," she said, adding that resilience will be critical for the job ahead, and that in order to tolerate his critics, he better choose forbearance.

"Dad," she said, in a slightly scolding manner, "that means you can't respond to every troll," an illusion to Collins' Facebook page, a digital warehouse of racist messages from people he's never met.

Collins' mother, Jamesetta, spoke next and reminded him where he might find strength. She spoke with the melodic West African accent of her native Liberian English. "When I heard about the election," she said, looking at her son, "I told him, 'God has a purpose for you! And now that he has given you the chance, you must utilize it to the best of your ability.'"

Taking his cue, Collins traded places with his mother, but his speech was brief: "My mom always says, 'God gave you two ears and one mouth to listen more and talk less.' So, I open my hands to you to say, I am here to listen." Collins then stepped out of the spotlight and joined his family.

Two days later, writes Mr. Furshong, I met with the mayor at a local coffee shop to talk more about his approach to his new job. Here's what he had to say.

On forbearance: [By the way, forbearance is defined as self-restraint in the exercise of power. It is the act of not exercising a legal right.]

“When we first moved here, my home was vandalized, ‘KKK, go back to Africa.’ You know, you can find that anywhere in America, but the reaction this community had – my neighbors got together and washed the walls down! That’s what my daughter is talking about. Initially it got to me but, you know, there is always 5 percent you cannot change.”

On listening:

“When I went on the campaign trail, I told my constituents: ‘I will listen to you.’ It is rare (to listen) in politics today, but that’s not me. These people who elected me, they are my neighbors. They are my community.”

After our conversation concluded, writes Mr. Furshong, I sat there and thought about this unusual elected official. I replayed the advice of his mother and daughter. I revisited the opinions they had shared and considered how they shared those opinions. No doubt, Helena’s new mayor understands the need for fierce policy debates at times. But the advice of his family reminds us of another need – to voice experiences and values that unite us rather than political platforms that divide us.

It is worth wondering how the toxic tenor of national political debates might change if more of us practiced forbearance. What would happen if, in the words of Montana’s first African American mayor, we opened our arms to one another and said, “I’m here to listen”?

What would happen if we, without judgment, opened our arms to our neighbors and said, “Tell me about your life, your joys and concerns. I’m here to listen”? What if we became “all things to all people” so that together we might grow into the community

that God desires? What if we practiced servant leadership? What if we were able to be God's chameleons in the world for the sake of the gospel? Who we are – the particular construct of our lives – is not what's important. What is important is that Christ lives in us. When we enter sincerely into the lives of others, the light of Christ that is in us can shine. This is not our doing. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. We can be chameleons – entering humbly and respectfully even into places that are challenging, uncomfortable and unfamiliar and blending in – because if we are truly ready and willing to be servants, God can work through us. The good news of Jesus Christ can be offered “free of charge.”

And rest assured, there is reward: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings,” Paul writes. What goes around, comes around. We, the world and all those whom we love will be blessed.

May it be so. Amen.