**Chameleon Christianity**

February 8, 2015

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scout Sunday

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

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

 1 Corinthians 9:22b-23

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**REFERENCES, PRIVILEGES AND PREROGATIVES!** If we were to reduce what will be said today to single sentence it might be this. **The Apostle Paul gave up preferences, privileges, and prerogatives for the sake of the gospel and he challenges us to do the same.**

**PREROGATIVE**

I suspect that very few of you have you ever been to the Island of Malta. It is a Mediterranean island that is hot every day of the year, and very sunny. I have never been there, but I once read about its chaotic traffic in a magazine. Cars and buses dart every which way with no apparent order whatsoever. The article went on to offer a policeman’s explanation about why the traffic was so disorderly. He said, "Well, in some countries they drive on the right side of the road; in other countries they drive on the left side of the road; here we drive in the shade. Everyone has their preference for it and believes that it is their prerogative.”

Our world is full of people who always want to drive in the shade. They are convinced that it is their prerogative and their right. It is their entitlement, not because they have done anything to earn or deserve this, it is just what they want and so they are convinced that their wish makes it their right. We don't tend to enjoy so much heat that the shade is constantly our desire, although this morning we might take exception to that view. We want to cool our heels, kick back and relax and take the easy way through life. Let’s let someone else do the hard tasks, wash the dishes, make the beds and take out the trash. It is our preference, our privilege and our prerogative.

One of the toughest tasks a church faces is choosing a good minister. A member of an official board undergoing this painful process finally lost patience. He'd just witnessed the congregational search committee reject a personal information form or resume for some minor fault . . . real or imagined. It convinced him that it was time for a bit of soul searching on the part of the committee. So he stood up and read this letter purported to be from a potential pastor.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications. I've been a preacher with much success and also have had some successes as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been. I'm over 50 years of age and have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places, I have left town after my work caused riots and disturbances. I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing. My health is not too good, though I still accomplish a great deal. The churches I have preached in have been small, though located in several large cities.

I've not gotten along well with religious leaders in the towns where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me, and even attacked me physically. I am not too good at keeping records. I have been known to forget whom I have baptized.

However, if you can use me, I promise to do my best for you."

So this committee member put down the papers from which he was reading all of this and said, "Well, what do you think? Shall we make a phone call and ask him to come for an interview to be the head of staff here?”

Committee folks were appalled! Consider a sickly, trouble making, absent‑minded ex‑jailbird? Are you crazy? Who hutzpah signed the application? Who had such colossal nerve? The board member eyed them all keenly before he replied, "It's signed, The Apostle Paul."

There is more than a little truth to that parody. St. Paul couldn't seem to please anybody. It was a common practice in Jesus' day for prominent philosophers and teachers to charge a fee for teaching and public speaking, but when Paul was in Corinth, he refused to do so. It's not that he thought he didn't deserve it. He is very clear on the fact that preachers and teachers of the Gospel deserve to get paid for their work. But Paul was grateful to God for all that God had done in his life, and he considered his salvation payment enough. Out of his great gratitude, he would willingly spread the Gospel. Evidently, some of the Corinthians criticized Paul, as if he weren't a real teacher if he didn't charge enough for his teaching.

Paul was a tanner and when working in cities where he started new congregations, often earned his living from the tanning trade. The term, tent-making ministry is has its origin in the work of Paul. A tent-making ministry is one where the pastor has employment from some job from which the primary portion of salary is earned and serves the congregation on a part time basis. We have a number of congregations throughout the country that utilize such tent-makers. Sometimes the pastor is a school teacher or an accountant.

We are also aware that Paul’s physical needs were cared for usually by members of the synagogue or the new congregation where he went. His income came from his tent-making. My brother-in-law, Jay Lewis is an attorney. For years he was Vice President and counsel for the investment firm of Parker-Hunter in Pittsburgh. Daily he went to Pittsburgh and took the elevator to his office in the U. S. Steel building, but as an ordained pastor of Redstone Presbytery, he served congregations on the weekends, usually preaching in small churches where he was needed and assigned. He was a tent-maker.

Paul couldn't win. If he charged for his services, he offended some people, if he didn't charge, he offended others. Any pastor who thinks he or she is exempt from criticism ought to go back and read the New Testament.

How much should one be compensated for a sermon? Well, former President Bill Clinton on more than one occasion has been paid more than $750,000 for one speech.[[1]](#footnote-1) Chelsea Clinton who has never held public office was an intern after graduating from college. When asked to make her first speech, she was paid $75,000 for it which has now become her standard fee. Rudy Giuliano decimated the Oklahoma State University’s annual speakers’ budget with his $47,000 fee. Sarah Palin makes $100,000 to $150,000 per tea party speech. When she was 19 Sarah’s daughter Bristol Palin was compensated $19,000 for her words of wisdom. If you want Richard Branson or Jack Welch to speak at your business luncheon you will be looking at six figures. How about Anderson Cooper, Alex Rodriguez, Kim Catrall or Serena Williams offering twenty minutes of their personal story at the same luncheon? Their fees start at $50,000 and go up from there. And if you are a super bowl winning coach your fee price will deflate the budget of most any organization.

**PRIVELEGE**

Still, like most pastors, Paul felt he was one of the most fortunate people in the world. Why? Because he had the privilege of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And, I might add, most of those who are paid the big bucks don’t get that opportunity, or if they do have it, elect to share a more theological and politically tepid message.

It isn’t very often that we have challenged someone to hear the call of the gospel. Like Jay, maybe this challenge is for someone in mid-life, someone who wonders if there isn’t some call from God through others or someone who has been avoiding God’s nudging. Yes, there are days when you know well that you haven’t served God well, when what you had to say at the funeral really wasn’t helpful, when you felt torn between two or three right things you had to do, and in the mind of someone would choose the wrong one.

But, there are rewards about which pastors seldom speak. There are those times when you get to watch a husband and wife embrace and be reconciled. She has had an affair and he has become distant, and their estrangement has been painfully mirrored in the challenges of the children. Finally they mutually have come for help and although you want to refer them to a competent marriage therapist, you are aware that mutual forgiveness will go far beyond what most marriage counselors can offer and through some movement of the Holy Spirit the words come and with tears they embrace right there in front of you. You leave the office for a few moments, just to give them the privacy they need now, and when you get outside into the hall all you can think is, “Thank you, Lord.”

You are sitting in the chair, pouring over the financial statement when he comes in and sits down. Then he takes out his needles and hands them to you and says, “Could you get me to a place where I can get better.” You ease him into the car and then you talk . . . do we need to go to Crisis Intervention or has something else happened . . . did you get IT from the needles . . . and he says, that he doesn’t really know about that. He just wants to get away from the habit and so you head to the Crisis Intervention Center.

A child phones and arranges to meet with you to talk about a God and Country award. Together you set up a series of appointments and review the nature of faith, the history of Christianity, and workings of a congregation. And then the boy says, “Can you show me where I was baptized, I’d like to feel the water again.”

You see her coming down the aisle. She is radiant in that dress. You remember the time when she was hospitalized and when she wondered if a day like this would ever come. And when she places her hand in his, you are as proud of her and what she has become as her own father.

I think that people in my congregations who have served as nurses in the maternity ward know the feelings. The maternity ward in a hospital is one of the places where you see the greatest joy and the heaviest pain. Most of the time the new baby that arrives and it is wonderful, but sometimes there are the stillborn children, or the children with special needs, and you feel the weight of responsibility and the heaviness of it.

You understand how like most pastors, Paul felt he was one of the most fortunate people in the world because he had the privilege of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What were the characteristics of Paul's life that caused him to have such an impact on the world? What can we learn from his life that will empower our lives?

**PREFERENCE**

**We observe that St. Paul took the Great Commission very seriously.** What is the Great Commission? You know the great commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." (Luke 10:27) The great commission is found in Matthew 28:19‑20: "Therefore go and make disciples in all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and then teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you; and be sure of this‑‑that I am with you always, even to the end of the world." (TLB)

St. Paul received these words of the Master earnestly tried to live them. Of the many choices available to him, he preferred these from Jesus and sought then to live them in his ministry. He wrote, "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. Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." That was what St. Paul's life was about . . . to win as many people as possible to Christ and his church. It is what he preferred to do. Paul was on a mission. People on a mission change the world.

At the end of World War II, Robert Woodruff, president of the Coca‑Cola Company from 1923 to 1955, had a mission. "In my generation," he declared, "it is my desire that everyone in the world have a taste of Coca‑Cola." With vision and dedication rarely matched in corporate American culture, Woodruff and his colleagues spanned the globe with their soft drink.

Why is it all right for people to feel that passionate about a soft drink but not about taking Christ to the world? Are there no places of darkness left where Christ's light needs to shine? Are there no families in crisis that need Christ's love and understanding? Are there none in poverty who need the gracious charity of the Master? Are there no teenagers in hopeless webs of addiction and violence who need to be liberated? Has our age of technological advance left us no problems which need to be alleviated, no wounds which only Divine Love can heal? Is our city perfect in every way? If it is, we certainly won’t need any security . . . and if we need some security . . . then it is a sign that we have a commission to be fulfilled . . . there are people to whom we need to go.

Paul felt a passion. He was on a mission. You and I are in this room today two thousand years later because St. Paul was not deterred. His life became centered on what ministry he had elected and preferred. He felt it was a privilege to serve his Lord and did not take this prerogative of opportunity lightly.

Not only did Paul take the great commission seriously, **he was willing to do whatever it took to win people to Christ.** Listen to what he says, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law . . . so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law . . . so as to win those not having the law." Paul was willing to do whatever it took to win people to Christ and our Lord’s message of love and forgiveness. Although by modern assertions of opinion and personal choices for wisdom that “you can’t be all things to all people” Paul must have sounded like a chameleon Christian, one that altered what others considered to be absolutes in order to be more winsome. Or had Paul ascertained that following Jesus meant embracing sensitivity, preferring to subordinate one’s own preferences and prerogatives in order to live out the message of Jesus with others?

Author, King Duncan tells about a motivational speaker once said there are two kinds of people in this world: those who say "whatever" and those who say, "Whatever it takes!" He's right! Some people live their lives within the mottos of petulant adolescence, "Whatever." Have you ever asked someone that you think is important and have them shrug their shoulders and respond, "Whatever?" Some people are like that with regard to their faith. Duncan suggests that a litany of **whatevers** will help people get the point. So, let’s try this. We can make a responsive reading of sorts. I'm going to make some statements. After each statement I want you to answer with a shrug, "Whatever."

Say it with an irritated sigh. "**Whatever**." O.K., Jesus said to love your neighbor. "**Whatever**." Jesus said there is more rejoicing over one sinner who is found than the 99 that stayed within the fold. "**Whatever**." Jesus said that when you have done it to the least of these you have done it unto me. "**Whatever**."

Now, let's change our response from “whatever” to "**Whatever it takes!**" Say it with firm conviction and resolve. Jesus said to love your neighbor. "**Whatever it takes!**" Jesus said there is more rejoicing over one sinner who is found than the 99 that stayed within the safety of the fold. **"Whatever it takes!**" Jesus said that when you have done it to the least of these you have done it unto me. "**Whatever it takes!**" “I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.” "**Whatever it takes!**"

George G. Hunter in his book, *Church for the Unchurched* tells about Bill who was a young man in his late twenties. Bill experienced a deep gift of faith and began serving as a counselor in the youth ministry of his church. He also launched efforts to revitalize the Men's Fellowship of the church by reaching out to young men in the community. But everything didn’t proceed smoothly.

Bill observed that most of the young men in his community like to gather in the fall to watch Monday Night Football on television, and the only places providing that setting were bars. He wondered if the Men's Fellowship could bring in a large screen TV into the church's fellowship hall on Monday nights and host unchurched men. He asked Big John, an acquaintance with long hair, a left earring, and a motorcycle if guys would be interested in watching Monday Night Football at their church. Big John stammered, "I would like to, help you there Bill, but I really don’t know the guys at your church and church is just not my preference for a place to hang on Monday night. But I might give it one try." When Bill proposed this Monday evening agenda to the Men's Fellowship folks he heard the sighing reply: "Sure, we could meet on Monday nights and watch football, but we’d really prefer to play a little scrabble. We like scrabble more than football. And we don’t want any beer around here. Sure, let’s invite them to come, but let’s tell them that we’d prefer to scrabble and if they want, they can put a small TV in here as long as it plays softly. Scrabble is OUR game.” (Could someone give me a **whatever**, please?)

Even with this revised agenda, Bill invited Big John to visit the Men's Fellowship. Big John liked the men, most of whom were older, and was attracted by what he understood of Christianity's message. But he felt uncomfortable, saying to Bill, "Look, with my clothes and hair and earring, I'm out of place here. Christianity is not for people like me. I'm out of here." Bill could hardly believe that he found himself saying, "If I get my ear pierced, will you come back?" Big John was moved, and said, "If you care enough about me to do that, sure, I’d think about coming back!"[[2]](#footnote-2) Then, Bill didn’t know how it even came out of his mouth. “What if I brought one of my friends to Sweeney’s bar where you usually go?” Big John, exhaled to full height and said, “If you did that, I’d bring all my friends to meet you and the Jesus you love.”

Now, I'm not suggesting that all the men at First Presbyterian Church commence adorning their ears with jewelry. But I am asking whether we are willing to do **whatever it takes** to win people to Christ and the Church of Christ? We’d probably have to set aside our preferences, our privilege, our prerogatives and our preferences. We’d have to become more chameleon like Paul who said, "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its **blessings**." (NIV)

**This means Paul understood that in order to minister to people in Christ's name we must meet them where they are, not where we are.**

A couple of weeks ago now, the officers of First Presbyterian Church had a little retreat at the Abbey of the Genesee. To the best of my knowledge, none of our elders, deacons or trustees got up to attend the first worship service of the day with the monks who hold theirs at 2:25am. (Of course the monks were in bed by 7:00pm). We tried to think about some goals for this coming year. One of them was, “Let’s have our congregation give a gift to the village and town of Pittsford in 2015 to let people here know that we are grateful for the opportunity to have our church gather here.”

One of our officers did ask, “What would happen if we made it possible for every member of 1st Presbyterian Church to live out their commitment to Jesus Christ by having some kind of a ministry?” To me this meant that for some their ministry might be leading worship and singing in the choir, for others it may be ushering or delivering flowers, and still for others their ministry may be carried on apart from this congregation . . . it might be something they did in the city of Rochester or at work, or where they exercise.

You wouldn’t know Maureen Charles. One time a number of folks built a home for her and her son, Jonah. As construction was happening, she looked at Jonah and decided to start an outreach for children in her home. Then some who worked on her home, returned after it was completed to do some electrical work and dry walling in her basement. Maureen invited the children in her neighborhood to have a place to go after school when their mothers were working and she eventually took care of 22 children there. Maureen did that before beginning her own shift at 7:00pm.

Then Maureen started the Lighthouse Ministry and weekly single women who had previously known addiction and abuse met for Bible Study in her basement after the children left. She has a ministry. But, so do the people who send birthday cards, who are prayer warriors who are part of the prayer ministry here and so do those who serve on the Red Cross board in Christ’s name. We have a ministry when it becomes a spring board from which to share the gospel whereby we can tell others about Jesus Christ, support them in their faith. Two of the greatest evangelists I have ever known were two high school girls who were determined to have a table in their school cafeteria where all would be welcome and nothing ill would be said about anyone else. (Danielle Rodriguez and Shelby Marciniak)

The Levi Corporation alone has more than one pair of blue jeans to sell. They have over 70,000 products of different sizes, shapes, types, and materials. We have the kind of worship services that appeal to us, the kind of ministries that appeal to us, the kind of fellowship life that appeals to us. We rarely stop to ask, what are the needs and the preferences of the people Christ has called us to reach?

St. Paul changed the world as we know it. With the help of Peter and the other Apostles he changed the tiny Christian community from a small sect to a worldwide influence. How? He was driven by a passion

*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. {21} 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. {22} 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*

‑‑to win the world for Christ. He was willing to do whatever it took to achieve his goals‑‑at least whatever was consistent with his calling as an emissary of Christ. And he was willing to focus on the world's needs and the world's preferences and not on his own. And why? Well, he tells us.

“I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”

He did it all for the gospel’s sake. For the sake of the gospel, Paul gave up his preferences, privileges, and prerogatives. He might have preferred a different kind of gospel or preferred a different way to worship. Paul had the privilege of being compensated handsomely for sharing the good news, and he certainly had the prerogative to be the first one served at dinner, to have the best parking space by the front door. But, these he set aside, voluntarily embracing the servant heart of Jesus himself.

I shall read 1 Corinthians 9:22 and 23 from The Message, the translation of these ancient words by Eugene Peterson.

*I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, and the demoralized - whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ - but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!*

 1 Corinthians 9:22b-23

 *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson

(1 Cor 9:22‑23 NRSV) 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. {23} I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

1. Before an audience of executives and employees of telecom firm Ericsson [NASDAQ:ERIC] in Hong Kong) and President Clinton has raked in at least $89 million (and perhaps more than $100 million) from similar appearances around the world since he left the White House. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. George G. Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)