

**For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, 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 not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:16-22)**

I officially started church ministry the summer of 1968. Five churches in Flatbush, Brooklyn hired me to create a summer long youth ministry from scratch. This was a time when Brooklyn churches were a big thing. Those five churches were thriving, and all the clergy got the summer off, for the most part, so I was left to my own devices. I quite literally had no idea what I was doing. This was a time (remember, it's summer of 1968) when the city would throw money at you if you did anything to keep the kids off the streets and keep them from burning the city down.

One day I took 100 kids to a Mets baseball game, the city gave us free tickets, free transportation for us two adults and 100 kids. There was no way to watch them all, so I just said, "have fun, meet me in the right field bleachers in three hours." Amazingly, we returned almost 75% of the kids to their families that night.

I had grown up in the Greenwich Village coffee house scene, seeing Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Joan Baez, Dave Van Ronk, little clubs, bad coffee, good music. Well, I thought to myself, "I can do that." So that summer I opened a coffee house ministry in our church basement. Bad coffee, good music, a little

religion. This is no exaggeration. I printed up 10,000 flyers announcing our grand opening, handed them out in person, hand to hand, in front of two local high schools and Brooklyn College and lots of subway stations. 10,000 flyers. Opening night, two people came: my mother and father. And they left early. Fifteen minutes before closing a boy and girl came in, got some coffee, played a game of chess, asked me what I was doing. When they left they said “be open next Friday. We’ll fill this place up.” And they did, the coffee house thrived for three more years with a little religion, bad coffee, good music. We had a few rules: they had to give me their guns and drugs at the door, the cops looked out for us, but didn’t roust us. That was my first foray into ministry.

One of our Bible verses for today has pretty much been my M.O. since 1968, for 53 years of ministry: “I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:22). Or we might say, “you do what you gotta do.” I bet most of you as parents have faced this, as we have...half of our kids hate medicine, refuse to take it. So, we’ve figured out how to sneak it past them. Hide it in applesauce, peanut butter, crush it, dissolve it, take it myself, bribe, cajole, threaten. We make that medicine become “all things that by all means” they might take it.

Church, religion, faith, Bible, Jesus – they’re all like that – they can taste it like medicine, lots of people can’t swallow it even though they – we – me – obviously need it. Wasn’t it Mary Poppins who sang, and advised, “a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down!”? That’s church ministry, trying to find the right ratio of sugar to medicine so we’ll take it. This isn’t original with me, Jesus dealt with people every which way. He dealt with the Pharisees one way, with the everyday workers another way, with Roman soldiers one way and the demon-possessed another way, and children one way and sinners another way.

It used to be said of teachers and coaches, “You have to treat all your kids the same way.” Well...no you don’t. The best coach I ever had, we had 15 boys on the team, he treated us 15 different ways all the way to the league championship. I coached the same way: some you have to kick in the seat of the

pants, some you have to pat on the back always, some you yell at, some you never raise your voice to, thereby “becoming all things to all people that by all means I might” get through to them.

I got thinking about this because, for the last month I’ve spent hours, days, writing this essay on the Israel/Hamas War, which in itself is an unusual turn for pastoral ministry. But it is pastoral ministry! Your hearts are breaking, aching at the horrific events of October 7, and beyond, to this very hour. The slaughters, the protests, the impact on our own friends and family, the geo-politics and election politics, the ethics, the morals, the sorrow. As your pastor I couldn’t ignore your hurt, so I wrote and wrote and wrote, usually beginning each day at 4am. In Northampton, Mass, where I did some writing, I took a long walk around town and came across two congregational churches. One advertised itself as a “Narcan Center.” Narcan is the life-saving procedure that you give to an opioid/fentanyl overdose victim to save their life. There have been so many opioid death - murders, really – in Weston, Massachusetts that this one church sees providing Narcan as an essential ministry.

Down the road is a church whose broad front steps have been taken over by a veritable economy of homeless people, with tents, bicycles, sleeping bags, shopping carts, provisions, you can’t actually enter the church from the front. I figured the church must be angry about it, upset, annoyed. Maybe someone. But what I came across, walking down Main Street, was a sign “Worship and Dinner 5pm” and indeed, that’s what was happening. Right there on the sidewalk by the entrance to that historic church people were having worship...and dinner. Tables were set up, food was abundant, volunteers from the church were greeting the homeless, serving the food, striking up conversation, all framed by worship prayer and scriptures and song and a message. This was that church’s world: a classic New England town, a historic congregational church, a busy Main Street, all the vibrancy of a college town and the stark reality of homeless Americans, poor, struggling, mentally ill, many veterans, the full range of American homelessness. And one church deciding to “be all things to all people that by all means...they might save some” or some one.

Churches that act like that, a church like ours, we model ourselves, however humbly, after Jesus. Jesus spent his whole ministry out and about, on the alert, looking around. Many years ago, there was a terrific business book about case studies of companies that could teach us a thing or two. One company they highlighted used a philosophy called “management by walking around.” Get out of your office, get down to the floor where the workers are, see their life, listen to their voices, know them. That is business talk for what Jesus did. He got out of his office, down to the floor where people live their lives.

Alida has often said that we get more ministry done going to Stop & Shop and The Pantry. We see more people, receive more prayer requests, get more updates. That’s true when we go to sporting events, town activities, the Memorial Day Parade. You heard the appeal from our Development Board a few minutes ago, about getting your church pledge in for 2024. I’m sure if we sent out two people to Stop & Shop, The Pantry, with pledge cards, we’d be done by tonight. Life is all around us – we go out to meet it.

Once a year I’m the guest speaker at SPF, our high school youth group. If you look around on Sunday morning, you won’t see many teenagers here. Oh, they’re here, alright, just not on Sunday morning. But we had a bunch of them helping with our Veteran’s Day service project; 20 of them orchestrated our huge Halloween party for little kids; there were 97 (did you hear that? – 97!) at the SPF meeting two weeks ago; several help our Sunday School every week. But mostly they’re not here sitting in a pew on Sunday morning. So last January I brought worship to SPF. We had music, great music, prayers, scriptures, two really inspiring speakers, all the elements of worship. The only difference was it was on a Thursday night, with pizza in the Barn.

This list goes on and on: Alida gave a prayer at K.J.’s literally world-famous Tae Kwon Do studio this week and at the Parish Court Thanksgiving Dinner for seniors, and I am doing a Cub Scout program on religion, and we do regular worship at The Watermark and Sturges Ridge. Why? Well, A, we never say “no.”

B, we definitely do try “to be all things to all people that by all means we will see, meet, know and save some.”