
All Things to All People

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia**

**Epiphany 5B -And Honoring the Children's Holy Eucharist Instruction Class
And Scout Sunday, And the morning before the Super Bowl**

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

Do any of you children know the parable of the six blind men and the elephant?

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 one 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."

That parable probably did not begin in a Christian tradition, but it sure describes a Christian truth. 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 or to serve 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 19th 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. God touches some of us from the right, and God touches some of us from the left.

Throughout my ministry as a priest, as I have tried to serve God's people, and God's church, advisors and consultants have insisted to me that I cannot be all things to all people. "You must choose your specialty, your particular call, your particular mission," they say - especially advertising advisors, "After all, you can't be all things to all people."

But I tend to dismiss those advisors and consultants, who take their lead from too constrained a vision, who don't start with the glory of God.

On the one hand, I know they are partly right. They are right in that *by myself*, I cannot be all things to all people. By myself.

But on the other hand, I believe that "to be all things to all people" is a vision, even a goal. It is a vision inspired by St. Paul himself, when he wrote to the Corinthians.

Listen again to what he 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 ...

Maybe Saint Paul accomplished that vision. But I admit that, today, no one person of us can be all things to all people. 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, Patriots fans and Giants 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" fuller" than they would have had if they had held on to only their own experience. The Christian Church is meant to be the totality of our individual touches of God.

This Eucharist experience, this Holy Communion experience is representative. 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 Holy Eucharist Instruction Class, or their confirmation class, or the Boy Scouts.

Or the Super Bowl party tonight. Or what faces us at work next 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.

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.

Ultimately, it is God who can be all things to all people. It is Jesus who became incarnate and so became the fulfillment of all the various hopes and needs of every person in the world. As we sang at Christmas, "O Little Town of Bethlehem the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

God meets all our hopes and fears, when God touches us in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus, who is all things to all people, so that he might save some. Individually, we cannot be all things to all people; but, together, we can be the Body of Christ.

Amen.

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