

Reflection Means Looking at Yourself

I Corinthians 9:16-23

What I'd like to know is this: who is responsible? What are you responsible for? I'm sure that there are many things for which you feel a responsibility, but what are the obligation(s) you are under by virtue of the fact that you were born into this world? What, for instance, did your parents tell you are your obligations? What about your teachers or your supervisors? What has your church told you?

Each of us has responsibilities – certain obligations. Some we choose and some we just seem to be born with. In the world of sports, one of the greatest obligations athletes have is natural talent – potential for excellence. Every once in a while, an athlete comes along with *unlimited potential* and they find that nothing they do is every quite good enough to fulfill the expectations.

We are just born with some responsibilities while we choose others. Do you own a home? Taking on a mortgage, or any time you borrow money, involves a chosen obligation. Couples who commit to each other take on the obligations of love. The same is true when people become parents. Even friendships involve a certain obligation of love and commitment. When I became the pastor of this congregation, I chose that obligation just as you chose it. We choose obligations of leadership, of financial support, and of pursuing our dreams. So then, if you could wipe the slate clean, starting this very moment, what obligations, if any, would you choose for yourself?

Curiously, this talk about obligation and responsibility brings us to the Apostle Paul and his first letter to the Corinthians. Half the books in the New Testament were attributed to Paul, though modern scholarship has revealed that just seven of these can be traced to the apostle beyond a doubt. First Corinthians is one of these. It is part of an ongoing correspondence between Paul and the community of believers in the city of Corinth. We are blessed today by all the issues and problems those Corinthians were having because Paul was continually having to respond to their questions. In the Corinthian letters, we have many of his responses.

One of the big issues in Corinth was the question of whether Christians should eat meat from an animal that had been sacrificed to the Roman gods. Paul insisted that the action of eating or not eating this meat was far less important than the attitude with which one approached the issue. Not everyone in Corinth liked Paul's answers and his authority and integrity were occasionally called into question. It is to a questioning of his integrity as a teacher and elder in faith that Paul seems to be responding in the passage that is today's scripture reading:

I want it made clear that I've never gotten anything out of this for myself, and that I'm not writing now to get something. I'd rather die than give anyone ammunition to discredit me or impugn my motives. (1 Cor. 9: 16-23, *The Message*)
Paul then reasserted his particular philosophy toward sharing the gospel with others.

I have to confess that, as a professional religious person – a pastor – I am not all that fond of Paul saying, “Why would I expect to get paid [for ministry]?” (1 Cor. 9: 17) That reminds me of the line in *The Cotton Patch Gospel* when the television evangelist’s questions Jesus’ motivation for healing all those people because he was *doing it for free!* I do not identify with that evangelist, but I do make my living doing ministry. I do get paid for my work and I believe that the financial arrangement does not compromise my integrity.

In all honesty, Paul was not speaking to any debate about whether or not to pay clergy in the early church. There were no clergy in the early Christian Church! The only professional religious people around were priests in the Jewish Temple, until that was destroyed, and priests of all the official and mystery cult religions of the Roman Empire.

Setting that issue aside, then, Paul was still defending his integrity. He was defending it against those who questioned him for his rather liberal views concerning the Jewish Law. This happened a lot to Paul, but he never apologized or backed away from his positions. I admire Paul for this approach and have found it to be the path I have traveled theologically during my pastoral career – especially in my seven years as pastor of Crossroads Church.

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. 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. 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. (1 Cor. 9: 20-23 NRSV)

A pastor is concerned with relationship. That is the core of the job. In many ways, a pastor is a professional friend who commits to walk with a congregation of people on the journey. I came to Crossroads with certain beliefs and understandings. In relationship with you, I have learned new things, reframed some existing understandings, and reinterpreted how I articulate my faith. In the nature of the job, I have tended to do this very publicly and in the context of relationship. Your questions have guided me. Your issues have challenged me. Your love has encouraged and emboldened me to go deeper on my own journey. I think that’s how it should be. I hope that my example encourages you to do the same.

Last summer, my family and I took a wonderful trip. We went to Italy where, among other locations, we visited the city of Florence – the cradle of the Enlightenment. Florence was the home of Dante, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo Buonarroti. In the Academia Museum we saw Michelangelo’s most famous statue of David. Seeing this statue was an experience of profound aesthetic joy at the ability of the sculptor to bring marble rock to life. As we approached the David, both sides of the hallway were lined with a series of unfinished statues also by Michelangelo. These carvings of men and women were in the process of coming to “life.” They left me with a profound sense

of striving in our lives: striving to become, to live, and to realize our potential. It became clear, that's why we are here: to strive, to become, and to live.

The gifts I have in life – gifts of thought, speech, music, writing, athletics, and compassion – are only realized in the process of striving, becoming, and living with you and with myself. There is a story about a juggler in medieval times who was so moved by the message of Jesus that he decided to become a monk. Unfortunately, every task he was given at the monastery proved to be a disaster. He just did not seem to be any good at anything that the monks considered God's work. Finally, the novice master gave him the job of sweeping the chapel, but even this proved a disaster. He accidentally knocked off one of the candles and it broke into several pieces. Beside himself with sadness and frustration, he picked up the bits of candle and began to do the one thing he knew he could do well. He juggled them. Nothing else was going on in the chapel and he figured God would enjoy the show. At that moment, the novice master came in and saw what he was doing. "Juggling in the chapel! How disgraceful! Stop it at once!" (told by Francis Dewar in *Invitations*, ch. 11)

Your gifts and my gifts, even if they don't seem like respectable church gifts, are from God. We can use them to please God and to follow Jesus. In fact, when we don't use our gifts, the world, the church, and God are poorer for the loss. Crossroads Church has some unusual gifts among our membership and as a congregation. Look no farther than your neighbor there in the pew or even yourself. What an unusual, gifted, and marvelous group of people you are – we are!

Our integrity for ministry comes by being uniquely who we are. Are we unique? Yes and no. There are, in truth, not too many churches like this one around. At the same time, we are just folks doing our best to discover and use our gifts and to live with integrity as we think God wants us to do.

A few years ago, when I had only been your pastor for a short while and when Crossroads was still meeting at St. Mark's Lutheran on 38th and Troost Avenue, I said in a sermon that I didn't think Crossroads would ever be a mega-church – one of those super churches. Honestly, I did not think that statement was much of a stretch or took very much insight. I could not see a church like this becoming a congregation of 10,000. One person in the congregation actually told me that was the kind of church he was looking for and, if we were never going to become a mega-church, he would not be staying around. He left the church and hasn't come back.

I felt badly and yet not in terms of Crossroads becoming an organization the size of Church of Resurrection, Pleasant Valley Baptist, or even FBC Raytown. I still don't see that in our potential and our giftedness. Look at us. We accept anybody! We hardly tell anybody what they have to believe. We encourage questions and go to extraordinary lengths hear from everyone when making decisions. I don't think we will ever be a mega-church that way! Rather than a congregation of 1000's gathering to touch lives, I see Crossroads as a church of 100's gathering here to experience life in the Spirit and touching tens of thousands of lives through our congregational ministries and through the lives of each of us. But we will only touch and transform the world if each of us takes

serious the obligation to become all we can be in terms of our relationship with God, each other, and our selves – discovering our individual and congregational calling, embracing our gifts, and living out that calling for the good of the world and the realization of our own potential.

This pathway is not without risk. “People who take the risk of doing what they are for, and are regarded as leaders, will be deified or crucified, or both.” (Francis Dewar, 94). But if our desire is to follow Jesus’ way, to find meaning in our existence, and to experience what the Bible calls abundant life, then we will do well to heed these words:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

(Marianne Williamson, *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*)

So let your light shine!

I Corinthians 9:16-23 The Message

15-18 Still, I want it made clear that I've never gotten anything out of this for myself, and that I'm not writing now to get something. I'd rather die than give anyone ammunition to discredit me or impugn my motives. If I proclaim the Message, it's not to get something out of it for myself. I'm compelled to do it, and doomed if I don't! If this was my own idea of just another way to make a living, I'd expect some pay. But since it's not my idea but something solemnly entrusted to me, why would I expect to get paid? So am I getting anything out of it? Yes, as a matter of fact: the pleasure of proclaiming the Message at no cost to you. You don't even have to pay my expenses!

19-23 Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, 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, 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!