

All things to all people

Paul writes elsewhere that we are each given different gifts for ministry. Here he says that he, at least, does it all.

By [Thomas R. Steagald](#)

February 2, 2009

I'd like to have words with Paul about his pastoral strategy in this week's epistle lesson. "I have become all things to all people." Oh, really? These words feed my insecurities and neuroses. And they inform, more than I wish, my job description and annual evaluation.

True, Paul writes elsewhere that we are each given different gifts for ministry, and that each of us should minister in the particular way the Lord has equipped us for the benefit of all. But here he says that he, at least, does it all.

Congregations expect it all of pastors, leaving us caught between competing expectations. But it's a chicken-and-egg question, because it's self-imposed too: all of us are trying to be all things to all people, whether for the sake of the gospel and its blessings (Paul) or for the lesser blessing of market share and its benefit to the budget and the annual report.

For me, co-dependent that I am, it has to do with identity. I hesitate to delegate, not so much because I'm afraid to impose as because I desperately need to make others dependent on me. John Baillie [confessed](#) that his "care of others" was often simply a "refined" form of self-care, a dynamic I've seen in myself.

Perhaps Paul was able to be all things to all people, though I've often wondered if his wizened benediction in Galatians—"Let no one trouble me further for I bear in my body the marks of Jesus"—might be a kind of grim acknowledgement that he was not. In any case, it's impossible for me.

I try to remember the famous counsel of Edwin H. Friedman, who [argued](#) for "leadership by self-definition." Rabbi Friedman's basic premise is evident in today's gospel lesson, in which Jesus does not yield to the expectations of others—even those of his own disciples. The disciples urgently want to return to Capernaum to reprise the events of the previous evening. But Jesus announces that his purpose is to preach in the neighboring towns—this is what he came to do. (This statement has enormous significance in [next week's gospel reading](#).)

It's understandable that Peter and the others want to have another go at healing the multitudes. These fishermen shine, if only by reflection, and the sudden celebrity status must have been intoxicating: "We have to do this again!" Besides, there were other people who needed healing, other demons that needed exorcizing—the text tells us Jesus cured "many" but not all. There was good reason to return.

But Jesus goes on, not back. Both spiritually and practically, he seems to have forgotten what lies behind and instead presses on. In this way he instructs our instructors, such as St. Paul and, later, [Hannah Whitall Smith](#):

Years ago I came across this sentence in an old book: "Never indulge, at the close of any action, in any self-reflective acts of any kind, whether of self-congratulation or of self-despair. . ." When the temptation comes. . . to indulge in these reflections. . . I turn from them at once and positively refuse to think about my work at all, leaving it with the Lord to overrule the mistakes, and to bless it as He chooses.