

"Chameleons."

Isaiah 40:21-31; Ps. 147:1-11, 20; 1 Cor. 9:16-23
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
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When you hear the word "Chameleon" is it a positive word or a negative word? Do you think of something that adapts to whatever environment it is in? Something that changes its stripes at the drop of a hat, bending with whatever the prevailing wind happens to be?

Do you know people whom you might describe as "chameleons"? Was the Apostle Paul a chameleon? Was he so desperate to make converts to Christ that he would use any tactic? Did the end justify the means for him? This text from 1st Corinthians, taken at face value, might seem to suggest that it did and that he was a chameleon of sorts. By his own admission: A Jew when around Jews, a gentile when around gentiles, a meat eater when around other meat eaters, a vegetarian when in the vegan crowd.

He had his critics back in the first century and he would have his critics today as well. But is it really fair to call him a chameleon?

For part of my sermon preparation this week I took a trip to the Bronx Zoo (Not really!) Actually, I got online and "Googled" Chameleon. Did you know that the word "chameleon" means "ground lion"? Go figure...

Madagascar is home to almost half the varieties of chameleons in the world. Their eyes can focus separately and give them an almost 360 degree view pattern.

Now comes the interesting part. Instead of changing colors to fit their environment, to blend in or to hide, chameleons change color to

fit their mood and to communicate and attract. Their coloration is for communication and making connections with others.

Seen in this light, Paul would probably be glad to be given the name Chameleon. His goal was to attract and to communicate the gospel. He acclimated and accommodated himself to the culture and the environment he was in, not to blend in but rather to stand out, that is to stand out as a proclaimer of the *Gospel of Jesus Christ*.

And in this act of accommodating himself to his culture, Paul was simply following in the steps of the Master.

"Accommodate" is the word that our famous forebear John Calvin used to describe what God has to do to be approachable by us. Since God is so far above our poor understanding and ability to comprehend, God has to make accommodations for our human limitations.

The grandest expression of God's accommodation is the Incarnation. God changes God's divine "stripes" and fits into our environment without scaring us all to pieces. As it is, Jesus did plenty of things that would scare us - - exorcising demons, raising the dead, calming the stormy sea, walking on the waves, rising from the dead himself.

Yes, there's plenty to scare us. But there is also plenty here to encourage us and to inspire us and to challenge us. Paul was challenged and inspired and obligated to preach the message of Christ.

He states this purpose clearly and up front. Early in this letter he reminded the Corinthians: "I decided to know nothing among you but Christ, and him crucified." Paul had his marching orders. He knew the obligation and the debt under which he lived.

He was indebted to the grace of God in Christ Jesus. He was willing to do whatever it took to get a hearing and to proclaim the love of God that breaks down every barrier and every wall between us. He had the skill and the ability to make connections with his culture in such a way that the unchanging message of God's love could be heard.

He had plenty to say about the culture of his day, but he didn't lay down the Law, that is, the Law of Moses from the Old Testament. He preached freedom from that Law because it was superseded by the Law of Love in Christ. Paul didn't force converts to change, force non-Jews to be circumcised as well as baptized.

We often cite Paul as the hardball player of the New Testament church, but we need to read him more closely. Especially today, when there is much in our culture that deserves to be critiqued and when the church seems to be marginalized at every turn. Surely the message of the gospel hasn't lost its value or its power, but we seem to be stymied about how to be heard.

Some argue that we must adopt the culture's norms in order to speak to the culture. Others say we must stand firm and insist that the culture move back towards us.

What is the true answer? If you know, write a how-to book, like everyone else seems to be doing. Make a mint, and then donate the proceeds to Chapel Lane - we could use the money!

We cannot adopt an "anything goes" attitude or say it doesn't matter what someone believes. Later in today's service we will be setting apart, through ordination and installation, women and men to serve as elders and deacons. They will be asked to give their answers to specific questions that make it clear that it does matter what someone

believes and it does matter how someone behaves and it does make a difference when followers of Christ step forward to serve.

For that is the true nature of our freedom in Christ. It is not license. Our freedom in Christ is expressed in love, love of God and love of neighbor. This love is shown best in service to others, following the one who came "not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Gospel, like love itself, always engages others right where they are. It doesn't require change as a pre-condition, even though it often leads to change.

Paul in Romans reminds us of this process when he wrote: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." God didn't wait for us to work things out perfectly before salvation could be given. It comes as the gift that makes everything else in life worth living, worth enduring, worth sharing in hopes that all might come to know the love, mercy and grace of God.

The church of today owes much to the chameleon work of Paul and of countless others, down through the ages. If we can continue to be flexible in the face of our rapidly changing environment and continue to keep the love of God in Christ as our message and also our means to delivering that message, I am confident that Chapel Lane and churches like it will continue to be vibrant and alive and relevant as we witness to the One who became a chameleon for our sakes - - not Paul, but Christ, - - stooping to our nature, accommodating himself to our weakness so that we might have a relationship of love and be in love with God and know the peace that passes all understanding and the joy of salvation that nothing can take away! Amen.