

Being all things to all people...mmm

There was once an old man; he lived way at the end of a holler. His grandson lived with him and he had a mule named Hinny that was very old and was of no real use to him anymore. One day he decided he needed to take the mule to town and sell him so he could stop spending money on food for an animal that could not help around the place.

So he and his grandson gathered their things and began the long journey down the holler toward town. When they began the old man was leading the mule and the young man was walking along side. They were joyful on a beautiful day with just a mist of moisture in the air. As they whistled their way toward town they passed a small cabin where an old man sat rocking on his porch. When the old man saw the two with the mule, he shouted out to

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them; “Why you old fool, you have a perfectly good mule and yet you and your grandson walk all the way to town.” After hearing this, the old man thought; ‘well maybe he is right, maybe we should be riding, so he hopped on the back of the mule and hoisted his grandson up too.

They went on a bit further and there were some women who were working in the garden, they stopped what they were doing when they saw the two go by. They began to shake their fingers at the old man and said; “Why I have never seen the likes of something so cruel in my life. There you are a perfectly healthy man and a young boy riding on the back of that poor old practically lame mule, you should be ashamed of yourself.” When the old man heard that he was embarrassed and immediately jumped down and left the boy to ride, because he was lighter weight.

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They continued on their journey and they passed the a group of young people who spotted them and yelled out at the man's grandson who was riding the mule and said; "Hey You, you should be ashamed of yourself, riding that mule and letting that old man walk, he could have a heart attack and it would be your fault." So then the old man had the grandson get off of the mule and he hopped on his back so the youngsters would not think ill of his grandson.

They went a little further and passed the veterinarians office and when they passed a lady was just coming out with her cat in her arms. When she saw the old man riding the mule, she hollered at him and told him how insensitive he was in riding that mule. The mule was old and should be treated with compassion in its old age. At this the old man thought you know she is right, this animal has served me well for many many years I do need to be more compassionate.

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At that the old man picked the mule up and put him on his shoulders and carried him. When they approached the ravine over the river they stepped onto the foot bridge and continued their trek across the ravine. However, the foot bridge was old and the wood was slippery from the moisture and the old man lost his footing and when he did, the mule fell off of his shoulders and over the rope on the bridge, falling 1000 ft. to the bottom of the ravine and was killed dead....

The moral to this story is that if you try to please everyone, you are bound to loose your Hinny.

I tell you this story this morning because when I read the pericope from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians it feels a bit like he is saying there is a need to strive to please everyone. However, that is not what he is saying at

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all. What Paul is saying is that while the message is the same, the hearers are not. We must meet people where they are if we want them to hear the message. We must be empathetic, considerate of them and their situations. We must strive to understand each other not from our own perspective, but from their perspective. We cannot assume we know someone's mind because we infer certain understandings from what they say or do. We cannot assume to know the struggles or joys people experience, because we are not them. We can only try to learn about them, we can only try to understand them. When we try to replace empathy, or compassionate caring and understanding with sympathy we risk making people feel they have been misunderstood and it can even feel a bit condescending. As Christians Paul is trying to tell the church in Corinth that when he wants to share the Gospel with people he does not come at them from who he is, he says he is a servant to all, and strives to meet them where they are, in their space, because he respects who they are and knows that he will be unable to reach them if he

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were to continue with his own perspective. He may not be able to make it understandable for them. When he speaks to Jews he speaks to them as the Jew he was and that is the beginning of his authentic ministry. When he speaks to those under the law, he is knowledgeable and speaks to them from the beginning place of God's law and explains Jesus' law. When he speaks to those who are weak in faith, he tells them of his weakness and how Jesus met him on the road. He says he has become all things to all people, that he may save some. His task is much more important than just making sure he pleases them, he is talking about their very salvation. It is literally a matter of eternal life or eternal death.

The Shunnamite woman wanted the holy man Elisha to understand her and her world so she invited him in and created a space for him in her home. Even though she was an unbeliever she invited him in. Elisha came to know the woman well and when she came to him in distress he recognized it and

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even though they came from different worlds with different understandings, she too recognized he was the one who could help her and refused to let him send his servant to heal her son. The two returned, her son lived and she believed.

Peter's mother-in-law fell ill and Jesus came to her and healed her, and later many came to have demons exorcised or to be healed. Jesus first is in the synagogue with the people of his heritage, ministering to them in the manner they could understand, he went to the house of Simon Peter to meet his mother-in-law where she was and he went to the door, the outer circle of people who were neither part of the synagogue, nor part of the inner circle of disciples and healed them. Jesus met each and every person where they were, he did not compromise who he was, or what he came to do, he did not try to make them all happy, he simply understood he had something to share and if he was to be heard he must be alongside them, understanding them.

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Once healed they were then in a place to be able to serve God and God's people, just as Simon's mother-in-law did.

Pleasing people and doing what we THINK they might want from us can be detrimental to our well being and that of those whom we seek to please, just like it was for Hinny. Seeking to know someone and to understand them will provide us with enlightenment and put us in a place for sharing the Gospel. It will also be as much a blessing to us as it is to them. So finally, the message for today is "don't exchange pleasing someone for loving someone" in a godly fashion.

Amen