

“The Most Radical Word Paul Uses”  
Romans 11:32-36  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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I’m going to ask you to do some memory work this morning.  
Let’s start with something easy.

If I were to say the words, “Fourscore and seven years ago...”  
--how many of you remember what I’m quoting?

Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, that’s right.  
Did any of you have to memorize that speech in school?

I’d like to begin this sermon with the beginning of the Gettysburg  
Address. You remember how it begins, right?

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this  
continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the  
proposition that all men are created equal.”

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Garry  
Wills makes the argument that what Lincoln did in that speech was not  
only sanctify a bloody battlefield, but attempt to “cleanse the  
Constitution” of its previous sin [of permitting slavery].

According to Wills, Lincoln “altered the [Constitution, in that  
speech] from within...[and by doing so] he performed one of the most  
daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the  
unsuspecting...”

How did he do this?  
With one little word—all.  
At Gettysburg, Lincoln said that all...really means all.

He cast a new vision for the country at Gettysburg, a vision for what the Civil War and the nation itself would be about. And what's fascinating is that the people who picked up on what Lincoln had done—were the CRITICS of his speech!

As the *Chicago Times* put it afterward:

“It was to uphold the constitution [i.e, the one that allows for slavery], and the Union created by it, that our officers and soldiers gave their lives at Gettysburg. How dare he, then, standing on their graves, misstate the cause for which they died...?”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, how dare Lincoln declare...that all really means all?

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Of course, our 16<sup>th</sup> President was not the first person to recognize the power of the word—all. Over 1800 years earlier, the Apostle Paul knew something about the power of that word as well.

Do you remember our text from Romans this morning?

“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that [God] may be merciful to all....For from [God] and through [God] and to [God] are all things. To [God] be the glory forever. Amen.”

We cannot do a sermon series on Paul without addressing his use of the word...all.

The word “all” is one of Paul’s favorite words.

So, here’s the second part of your memory work this morning.

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<sup>1</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Let's see if you recall any of these words that Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians, chapter 9:

"I have become all things to all people..."

Or 2 Corinthians, chapter 5:

"...we are convinced that one has died for all..."

Romans, chapter 8:

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God..."

And Galatians, chapter 6:

"So let us not grow weary of doing what is right...whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all."

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All...was an important word for Paul.

Have you ever thought about this word before?

On the one hand, it's a word full of promise and possibility.

For example, growing up in Michigan, I had never heard the phrase "All y'all."

It wasn't until I moved to Texas that I first started saying it.

And over the course of the past 26 years, I've grown to love it, and you've been very patient with me when it comes out my mouth with a strange Midwestern accent.

All y'all.

A wonderful way to say no one gets left out.

And yet, we tend to exaggerate when we use the word all.  
 Have you ever noticed that?  
 We say all...but do we mean all?

I've mentioned before that my first year out of college, I worked for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. And as the name indicates, it's an organization of the Catholic Church, so I attended Catholic mass each week. Which meant communion was offered every single week, which presented me with something of an issue.

I had been taught that only Catholics are supposed to partake of the Eucharist. But during that year, for better or worse, I ignored this rule.

And I took communion each Sunday.

And to the priests' credit, I was never questioned or turned away. No matter what the official doctrine was, when it came to communion, those priests understood that church is THE place where you don't leave people out.

That's what ALL means.

And yet, in telling you this, I fell into the trap.  
 I said I went to church every week when I was with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

Really, Ben?  
 Each week? Every week?  
 You never missed church once?

Well, maybe once...yeah, even more than once...  
 but if I missed it just once, it wasn't ALL.

Do you see the problem?

Paul loves this word, all.

But all can become a slippery word.

A difficult word.

A radical word.

An offensive word.

The theologian Miroslav Volf is a professor who teaches at Yale. Volf has a colleague, another professor named Carlos. Carlos' family is from Cuba, and one day—this was years ago, when Fidel Castro was still alive and in charge of Cuba—Carlos was visiting his mother in Chicago, some Cuban friends of the family were there.

So they started a friendly theological inquiry.

“Listen, Carlos,” said one of the friends. “I was thinking...If by some miracle Fidel [Castro] turned to God in repentance before he died, would he go to heaven?”

Carlos, the theologian from Yale, said:

“God’s grace is for all people, dictators included!”

The woman who asked the question was NOT impressed with Carlos’ Ivy League credentials.

She thought, and she thought, and she said:

“If Fidel gets to heaven, then I don’t want to be there!”<sup>2</sup>

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There’s something in us that RESISTS the word *all*...

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<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

Why?

You know why.

“All” levels the playing field.

“All” reshuffles the deck.

“All” gets rid of those important social distinctions that you and I like to make among other people.

What’s at stake with the word “all”?

Why does Paul use it...all the time? (Pardon the pun.)

The first thing that’s at stake is our faith imagination about one another. The way we look at family and friend and neighbor and stranger...the way we see them. Because it’s easy to forget that we’re all cut from the same cloth...

I recall the time, a number of years ago, back when we lived in Texas, there was an elderly gentleman a few houses down from our house.

He lived by himself.

He called me at work one morning.

It was 9:30am.

I thought something was wrong.

Our neighbor never called me at work.

Must be an emergency.

But when I got on the phone, he said he was calling because he wanted to contact the person who cleaned our house. He wanted to see if she could start cleaning his house as well.

“Let me check with her first,” I said. “I really don’t know if she’s taking new clients. How about I ask her the next time I see her, and then I’ll let you know?”

I thought that would be the end of the conversation.  
But Bob—our neighbor—he said:

“Ben, I just need her once every couple months—can you just give me her phone number?”

“No, I’m not comfortable passing out her phone number.”

“Well, could you call her for me this morning?”

“I can ask her the next time I see her.”

“When will that be?”

“Uh, maybe next week...look, I’ve kind of got a lot to do at the moment...”

“Ben,” he said, “I’m getting the feeling that you don’t want me to hire the person who cleans your house to clean my house. If you don’t want me to use her...”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Well, then when can I talk to her?”

It was at that point that I lost my patience.

“Bob, I’ve got MANY things to do right now. I don’t have time to talk about this anymore. We’ll ask our housekeeper next week if she’s taking new clients, and then I’ll get back to you...is that clear?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s clear.”

He hung up the phone.

I hung up the phone.

I came out of the office mumbling and grumbling:  
 “He knows better than to call me at work...”

But the truth was, I knew better.  
 I knew that Bob was starting to decline.  
 I knew that he was living on his own, newly divorced.

You see the problem, right?

I thought I needed to get back to my job, back to work.

But the work that God was giving me at that moment was being patient with my neighbor, loving my neighbor who was, on that particular day—difficult to love.

That’s the first thing “all” means.

Do you have anyone in your life like that right now?  
 Someone who is difficult to love?

The next time you’re with that person...I want you to remember how much the Apostle Paul loved the word “all.”

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In fact, it’s not just Paul that loved this word.  
 The Gospel writers loved it too.

Here’s the third part of your memory work today.  
 Let’s see if you can fill in the blanks.

Gospel of Luke.  
 Christmas story.  
 The angel says to the shepherds:

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...”

Gospel of Matthew.

Great commission.

The risen Christ says to his disciples:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”

Gospel of Mark.

Jesus tells his disciples:

“‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’”

Gospel of John, chapter 12.

Jesus says:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Actually, a better translation of the Greek word here is drag.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will drag all people to myself.”

Can you picture that?

Can you imagine Jesus...dragging...

every single child of God...

to his love and to his judgment

and to his gentleness and to his grace?

You see, what's at stake with the word "all" is not only our imagination about one another, how we see each other. It's our imagination about God, and how far God's love and grace will go to get us and grab us and bring us back to God.

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During our years in Dallas, I got to know a colleague in the Presbytery named Princeton.

He came to the United States from Nigeria in 1976.  
On his first Sunday, he went to church.  
It was a fundamentalist Baptist church.

And when he showed up, the pastor asked him to leave.  
Princeton had no idea why.

"Mistreating others based on the color of their skin went against Nigerian values of treating strangers with great kindness, [Princeton] said, so he returned the following week for Sunday school."

"This time they all moved away from me," he recalled.  
"The third Sunday, the pastor showed me his gun. I didn't go back anymore."

But rather than quit on churches in the United States, Princeton tried again, and this time was welcomed warmly by folks at another Baptist church. Eventually, Princeton found a home in our own Presbyterian denomination, and he went on to become ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

I remember being at a committee meeting with him once.  
Princeton made a comment about his scar—if memory serves, I recall him pointing to a scar on his hand.

I had shaken his hand any number of times.  
 Never noticed, never paid any attention to the scar.  
 Behind that scar was Princeton's story.

Princeton, you see, was a child soldier in Nigeria from 1967-69.

"I was...taken by the Igbo tribe as I went to get water for my mom," he said. "It's hard to explain, because it doesn't seem real, but once I got out—

[in other words, once he was free from being a child soldier]—

"the Spirit of the Lord came upon me and asked me  
 to go back to some of the families  
 that we had committed atrocities against."

"How the men and women in that village responded to him transformed his life.

**Experiencing their forgiveness, he said,  
 gave him freedom to allow God to pursue him,  
 and inspired him to pursue others  
 with grace and love."**<sup>3</sup>

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That's not just Princeton's job.  
 That's our job.

To remember, this day and every day, to pursue other people with the grace and love of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Seebeck, "God Is Writing History In Our Lives," Presbyterian News Service, August 12, 2015, <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/8/12/god-writing-history-our-lives/>.

Now I've given you a lot to remember this morning—the Gettysburg Address, verses from the 4 Gospels, 5 or 6 verses from Paul...and I realize your memory might be getting tired.

So just case your memory is kaput, and the phrase “other people” is too long for you to remember, I've got a shorter word for you.

It's only got three letters.  
It was one of Paul's favorites.

What's the word?  
All...

Pursue ALL with the grace and love of God...

(Amen.)