

**“It’s Not All About Us”**  
**1 Corinthians 9:16–23; Mark 1:29–39**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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In an episode of the old television series *ER*, Dr. Carter has a difficult time. He is trying to help an elderly female patient and her husband, but the woman dies, and he is left with the feeling that he has failed this couple. Overwhelmed by his emotions, he decides to go to the graveside service and apologize to the man, but when he arrives, the service has already begun. He approaches the man anyway, but before he can finish his prepared speech, the man interrupts him, saying, “Dr. Carter, this day isn’t about you,” and he walks away abruptly.

It is a profoundly insightful scene. How often do we go through the motions of trying to help someone else but in a way that reveals our preoccupation with self? The first rule of any kind of care is taking seriously what the other person wants and needs. At some level, we may be trying to help, but often we are attending to our own need to do something for them and thus make ourselves feel better.

Most of us would readily acknowledge that putting others first is a central calling of Christian discipleship, but not only does this go against the grain in our self-obsessed culture, it is not easy to do even if we want to do it. There is nothing wrong with addressing our own needs. In fact, we must if we are ever to care for others in a way that begins with their needs. And there are many people in this world who have so little that their single-minded pursuit of basic necessities is understandable. But for most of us who have enough, the challenge is shifting our focus to others. We still have needs, but it’s not all about us.

Putting others first is a ubiquitous theme in scripture, including two of today’s readings. In the reading from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul describes his evangelical strategy. He says that when sharing the faith with Jewish people, he has claimed his Jewish heritage, even though it is no longer central to his life. When sharing the faith with Gentiles, he has become as one outside the law, like the Gentiles. He

has become weak when relating to the weak. He has become all things to all people so that some might experience salvation.

Now, many of us have learned that we cannot be all things to all people. Even Jesus cannot heal everyone, as seen in the reading from Mark wherein he heals some people in Capernaum but says he must move on to another town even though there are others there in need of healing. The point is not that Paul has become all things to all people literally, but that he has been willing to set aside self-interest and put others first to share the Gospel. The goal of his witness is so important that he is willing to lean into whatever needs his hearers have.

In the reading from Mark, Jesus and his first few disciples go to Simon and Andrew's house in Capernaum, ostensibly for a time of rest and renewal, but Simon's mother-in-law is there too — multiple generations live together quite often in this culture — and she has a fever. They tell Jesus about it, surely with an expectation that he will help, and of course, he does, even though he needs rest.

Word travels quickly in a small town, and soon they are inundated with people who are sick or possessed by demons, and Jesus heals many of them. Weary from these acts of self-giving, Jesus seeks out some time alone the next morning, but Simon and his companions *hunt him down* — this is what the text says — and tell him others are searching for him. There will be something like a COVID vaccine waiting line if they disclose his location! But Jesus says he must move on to other towns — not to rest, but to proclaim his message and to heal.

Again and again, Jesus puts the needs of others first. He also seeks to practice self-care. We should not miss this lesson. But when push comes to shove, he will do everything he can for others.

The message for us, both from Paul and Jesus, seems clear. We matter immensely, but it's not all about us. We have a calling to put others first in our witness and with our compassion.

What might our culture look like if more people were to think in this way? We live in such a selfish time. We have a history of rugged individualism and we are taught to look out for number one. And so, we have ended up looking like a group of basketball players who aren't really a team because each player is trying to get his or hers and thus

everyone suffers. Only when a team plays like a team can it be any good, and each individual benefits from focusing on the others.

COVID-19 is Exhibit A. Many people have taken the precautions seriously all along, realizing that when we wear a mask, maintain a safe distance, and follow other guidelines of group size and sanitation, we are not just protecting ourselves, we are protecting others, especially the most vulnerable. Our people have certainly taken all of this seriously, but many in our culture, including many church people, have not. They have asserted their individual rights and freedoms at the expense of others. Rugged individualism has its merits, but without the balance of social concern, it is an insidious disease. We live in community and thus depend on each other, whether we want to or not.

Much conversation about political matters reflects this obsession with self. The old form of this theme is to ask in any election whether I am better off or not because of a current administration. This is not a bad question, it's just an inadequate criterion on which to base a vote, certainly from a Christian perspective, but also from a thoughtful human perspective. While I care about how I am doing, I should also care about how my neighbor is doing, because even if I don't feel a Christian calling to care about my neighbor, just in practical terms, how my neighbor fares will eventually affect me.

The updated version of this theme is to focus only on how my investments are doing. Again, it is not a bad concern, but by itself, it can be dangerous. I certainly care about my investments, my retirement money, I am not that many years away from retirement. It has been wonderful to see our church's endowments increase significantly — due to the amazing generosity of our members, a shift in investment strategy, and the growth of the market. I am not opposed to any of this.

But can we really care only about how our investments are doing while the majority of our neighbors have no investments? Does no other issue or concern matter? How many difficult issues, like racial injustice, might be addressed more effectively if we were to think a little less of ourselves and a little more of others?

Even on an individual level, how might our quality of life improve if more people were willing to think beyond themselves and their own

needs? In his book *Who Needs God* Harold Kushner includes a story which highlights our tendency to focus on self (p. 100). The wife of a British colonel in India was expecting important guests for tea one afternoon, but when she looked out the window, she was horrified to see that the man who swept the leaves off her front steps every morning had not shown up. When he finally arrived, she unloaded on him.

“Don’t you realize what you’ve done to me?” she said. “Do you know who is coming here in an hour? I ought to fire you and see to it that you never get another job anywhere in the city!” Without looking up, the man quietly said, “I’m sorry. My little girl died during the night, and we had to bury her today.”

She was so focused on her own need that she had not allowed any space for him to have a need. But this is how we often proceed with the cashier who is not working fast enough, the person in front of us who is driving too slowly, the mail carrier who is late again. We don’t know what is going on in their lives. What if we were to leave just a little room for their humanity, to put on hold what we think is a critical need for just a moment? What might life be like?

We might ask a similar question of the church. I know we think of ourselves as being Jesus people. We probably hear a couple dozen Sunday School lessons and at least as many sermons that relate to loving our neighbor in any given year, and we nod our heads in agreement. But even in the context of church life, before we get to the matter of reaching out to those beyond our walls, it is tempting to focus on ourselves.

I have shared with some of you before a story my theology professor, mentor and friend Frank Tupper told on himself. It was years ago at Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, Steve Shoemaker was the pastor, and he had preached several similar sermons that Frank apparently didn’t find very helpful. So, as he greeted Steve at the door on the third Sunday, he said, “Steve, that’s three Sweet Jesus sermons in a row. I don’t need another one!” Steve replied, “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Nor did he need to be, Frank said, when he told me this story. Not all sermons are for any one of us, not all hymns or anthems either, or anything else in the life of the church. The church is for all of us, and

sometimes the very thing that we find meaningless or perhaps even irritating is the very thing that keeps someone else on his/her feet and filled with a sense of purpose. We matter, but it's not all about us.

Yet this principle applies even more forcefully to our witness of compassion beyond the walls of the church. While the ministry of the church begins with caring for the needs of all its members, including our spiritual needs, it is not all about us. We have a calling to go beyond ourselves, like Paul sharing the Good News, like Jesus teaching and healing. In fact, some would argue that this is the primary purpose of the church — not just to maintain itself but to serve the world.

This is a part of why we created the ministerial role of Minister with Community that Leah Reed embodies so well. We had to fill the responsibilities of a former position — Minister of Adult Education — in other ways; that is still a work-in-progress. But we have four positions devoted to nurturing the church, though each of our ministries connects with the community too. We thought it just made good Christian sense to have one position out of five fully devoted to the community, focused on others — because in the church, it's not just about us.

The irony is that when we put others first, we end up benefitting. This is not why we do it, but it is a reality, because our lives are all interconnected and because there is no better feeling than that of knowing we have helped others — it's just how we are made.

While speaking to the church I served at the time, an African-American colleague in Winston-Salem shared an image that has stuck with me. He said, “Imagine heaven as a great banquet. We all have a place at the table and the feast is magnificent! There is more than enough for all! The catch is that none of us can feed ourselves. We can only feed one another.”

It is a wonderful image of heaven and not a bad vision to pursue in this life. We need each other in more ways than we can name. It's not all about us.