

Scripture Reading for Sunday September 6th 2020

Romans 12:1-13 (New Testament for Everyone)

12 So, my dear family, this is my appeal to you by the mercies of God: offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Worship like this brings your mind into line with God's.² What's more, don't let yourselves be squeezed into the shape dictated by the present age. Instead, be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you can work out what God's will is, what is good, acceptable and complete.

³ Through the grace which was given to me, I have this to say to each one of you: don't think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think. Rather, think soberly, in line with faith, the true standard which God has marked out for each of you.⁴ As in one body we have many limbs and organs, you see, and all the parts have different functions,⁵ so we, many as we are, are one body in the Messiah, and individually we belong to one another.

⁶ Well then, we have gifts that differ in accordance with the grace that has been given to us, and we must use them appropriately. If it is prophecy, we must prophesy according to the pattern of the faith.

⁷ If it is serving, we must work at our serving; if teaching, at our teaching;⁸ if exhortation, at our exhortation; if giving, with generosity; if leading, with energy; if doing acts of kindness, with cheerfulness.

⁹ Love must be real. Hate what is evil, stick fast to what is good.¹⁰ Be truly affectionate in showing love for one another; compete with each other in giving mutual respect.¹¹ Don't get tired of working hard. Be on fire with the spirit. Work as slaves for the Lord.¹² Celebrate your hope; be patient in suffering; give constant energy to prayer;¹³ contribute to the needs of God's people; make sure you are hospitable to strangers.

Sermon: Wholehearted Transformation

Today's reading from Romans 12 seemed an appropriate passage at this time of new beginnings, not only as we meet "in-person" for Worship for the first time in nearly 6 months, but also for Labour Day weekend, which traditionally marks the end of the summer and going back to school. Switching from the Gospels to Paul's letters can be tricky, and jumping into the middle of a complicated letter like Romans is a particularly dangerous thing to do.¹ However, Romans 12 marks a transition in this letter, moving from some of the principled - though very important - theology of the first 11 chapters to the

¹ You should also know that this particular letter has had a huge impact on church history, inspiring people such as St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Karl Barth, and many others to reinvigorate and reform the Church.

ethical and practical implications of that theology for a believing community in the latter part of this letter. The point being, if you go are going to leap into the middle of Romans, chapter 12 is a good landing point!

First, just a little background information, Paul did *not* establish the church in Rome but he was eager to visit it; Rome was, after all, the center of the whole Empire. This letter is probably written around 57 A.D., which means *before* any of the Gospels were written, and to a church that contained both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. Churches that contain people from various ethnic, cultural, and class backgrounds can struggle to be a unified community. This was nothing unique to Rome; all the other churches had similar issues. In this last section of Romans are words of exhortation and encouragement to live and work *together*. However, this only makes sense in the context of the first part of the letter which details to both Jews and non-Jews the *basis* on which God has brought them together in Jesus the Messiah. It's an ongoing work of God's grace, and not of human merit or achievement.

In light of his earlier detailed arguments, Paul says to the Church, "I *appeal* to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present *your bodies* as a sacrifice – alive, holy and pleasing to God – which is *your reasonable worship*".² When we hear this, we're not particularly impressed because we get stuck on that word "sacrifice." Sacrifice is full of negative and painful connotations to us. Never mind the unfamiliar religious imagery that evokes dead animals and lots of blood, we're aware of – for example - parents sacrificing for their children, whether that is financial, or putting aside their own personal ambitions and plans for the well-being of those they love. Sacrifice, then, seems to involve a "dying" and that doesn't resonant with our culture's self-centered values. I suggest we look at it a different way; although Christians didn't offer animal sacrifice, everyone understood it was the *focal point* of worship whether you were Jewish or not, and they were intended to bring *harmony* in the community.³ The focal point of *our* worship, then, is to *wholeheartedly* live lives that are holy and pleasing to God, and – says Paul - if we do that it will result in concord in the Church. Paul stresses presenting *our bodies* as a sacrifice; this simply means *everything about us*, including our minds and emotions. The gospel writers put it this way: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength," and they're only quoting words attributed to Moses!⁴ It's unfortunate that the end of Romans 12:1 is often translated "which is your *spiritual* worship" because the Greek word has nothing to do with "spirit." The root word used is "logic" and hence the translation "which is your *reasonable* worship" is much more appropriate.⁵ In other words, Paul's point is that, because of God's mercy revealed in Jesus Christ, it only makes *rational sense* that we worship God with our *whole* beings, with everything we have – and that means every day, not just for an hour on Sunday!

² Rom 12:1. The Church community, then, is the temple of the living God. (We enter the "new age" via baptism.)

³ Remember in that day, sacrifices were *also* offered to appease and honor Caesar. The fact that Christians didn't participate in such acts created suspicion and social tension.

⁴ Mark 12:30; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27; and they are only quoting Deut 6:4-5! Note, this focus eliminates idol worship.

⁵ The Greek word's root is *logos*, not *pneuma* here. According to John, the worship of God requires is "in spirit and in truth," (John 4:23) and this seems to tie in with some of the sentiments behind "living sacrifice." Our minds are involved; see also 1 Cor 2:16; Rom 8:5-8.

Having mentioned our intellects, Paul goes on: “Do not be conformed to this present world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*, so that you can *work out* what God’s will is, what is good, acceptable and complete.”⁶ This is a critically important verse; understanding this sentence opens the doors to the practical life of a Christian. First, Paul calls us to a new way of *thinking*. Our culture has a whole set of values that influence the way we think and behave in society. Here are some examples to consider: individuality, equality, freedom, rights, competition, efficiency, work-hard-play-hard, ambition, status, wealth, social media, family and friendships. You can, of course, add or subtract from that list. And *because it is cultural*, the most important values will change depending on global location; they will be different in Japan than in Jamaica! How we live, work, raise children, etc., are all influenced by the values and philosophies of our culture – what Paul’s calls “the present world.”⁷ Some of those values are subtle, others are blatant. In Paul’s day, the underlying cultural philosophy was strongly shaped by the Roman empire. Paul, says *have your values shaped by God, not this world*. Paul therefore saw the Church as a *countercultural* community and exhorts his readers not to conform with the values around us. Note, Paul was not totally *against* culture, we see that later, what concerned him was God alone being the object of our prime loyalty.⁸

Second, he goes on to say this is a *process of transformation*. The Greek for “transformed” is the word “*metamorphosis*” and that, as we know, describes the way a mundane caterpillar changes into a beautiful butterfly. God’s Spirit transforms us into people who are shaped by God’s character and values, as revealed in Jesus the Messiah. And, as any counselor will tell you, if you want to *behave* differently, we must first learn to *think* differently. It’s a lifelong progression, an ongoing work of God’s mercy and grace.⁹ Sometimes it’s slow work! Patience and persistence are both required. This transformation process is *not* following a set of rules; that’s *not* what *grace* is all about because we don’t *need* to – nor *can* we – earn God’s favor by rule-keeping. God grants us forgiveness because of Christ’s faithfulness, as Paul tells us earlier in Romans.¹⁰ The issue is *how* we respond appropriately to that freedom in gratitude and service. Paul says, then, that this metamorphosis is precisely so that we “can work out – or *discern* – what God’s will is, what is good, acceptable and complete” as the Church journeys forward *together* as a maturing community.¹¹

What does this mean in practice? First, it means working hard to develop and maintain *unity*. Since we were all baptized into one family, live in harmony! And the starting place, says Paul, is for every person

⁶ Rom 12:2. NET/NTE.

⁷ The use of the word “present” has eschatological connotations with the “age to come.” See also Gal 1:3-4 – “present evil age.” See also 1 Cor 1:20; 2:6-8; 2 Cor 4:4.

⁸ Christians therefore follow Jewish tradition; to worship God and not “idols,” i.e.; any form of alternative to God.

⁹ You will recall the word “repentance,” a term used by John the Baptist, simply means a U-turn; a reorientation of one’s life back to following God. It is primarily a call to *think* differently.

¹⁰ Rom 3:21-22; Gal 2:16-20 (NET, NTE).

¹¹ That doesn’t mean that there are no boundaries, but the center of genuine Christianity is a mind awake, alert, and thinking through the many issues and being sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

to *not* think of themselves more highly than they ought.¹² Paul begins this plea with the phrase, “By the grace given to me . . .”; he was, after all, a persecutor of Christians before his “Road to Damascus” experience.¹³ During that pre-Christian phase of his life, he was convinced he was right, yet his zeal was counterproductive to God’s mission. Yet God extended grace to him and, over time, Paul *transformed* his thinking. Not recognizing our own flaws and only bragging about our strengths is a sure way to create resentment and disunity in a community. Being loved unconditionally by the Creator God makes us special enough without imagining that we have some superior merit based in pedigree or status, whether social or religious. There are *no* first and second tier Christians; we are all *one* in Christ. That being the case, concludes Paul, there are no grounds for inflated egos; instead have genuine humility.

Paul then mentions one of his favorite metaphors for the Church – a *body*. “For just as in one body we have many members, and not all the members serve the same function, so we who are many are one body *in Christ*, and individually we are members who belong to one another.”¹⁴ This image of the Church as *the body of Christ* stresses our *unity* as well as emphasizing the *necessity of diversity*. Unity, however, *doesn’t* mean uniformity; you will be relieved to hear we are *not* all meant to be cookie-cutter Christians! Just as a body has limbs and organs, the Church body is made up of people with different talents and roles. God’s grace itself is multifaceted.¹⁵ God gives different people different gifts and abilities that are needed for the work of the gospel to flourish. This is partly a matter of what we call natural temperament; some are “born” leaders, some are instinctively warm, generous-hearted people. But it’s *also* a matter of God’s gracious Spirit enhancing the abilities and inclinations we already have. And in the transformation process I mentioned earlier, new abilities can emerge that neither you nor anyone else imagined before. Consider this analogy: a soccer team needs attacking, goal-scoring forwards, as well as defenders and a good goalie. And they need fast, creative mid-field players who link those two groups together. As the players understand their role in the context of the whole team, they each experience freedom while recognizing their need of each other. Egos can kill a team’s effectiveness, yet every team member needs to enhance their own skill and stamina, as well as receive appropriate recognition of their contribution, if the whole team is to function as a coherent unit. In the same way, a Church needs its preachers and those with sensitive hearts for pastoral care; it also needs those who are good at technology and repairs to the building. It needs people who are both generous with the time and their wallets. It needs people who are great at making coffee, as well as having good organizers, and so on. What is wonderful is to witness the way God brings various skills together. We must remember, however, whatever the gift, God is the Giver. And we are to *accept* ourselves where we are right now on this journey, and use the gifts that God has given us *wholeheartedly* - with energy and flair - rather than envy over someone else’s gift and abilities. Whatever gift we have, it’s part of a

¹² Rom 12:3; see also 11:25.

¹³ See Acts 8:3; 9:1-19.

¹⁴ Rom 12:4-5. See also 1 Cor 12; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Unity-Diversity-and-Interdependence.pdf>.

¹⁵ Rom 12:7-8. These lists are not exhaustive and need not be over-analysed!

Christian's responsibility to use it for the glory of God and for the good of our fellow human beings, both inside and outside the church.

But that doesn't make this transformation process easy. And if egos get in the way, a community can become toxic. This is not only true in churches, but in any place of work. That's why Paul moves on to talk about *love*; he begins: "Love must *not* be hypocritical."¹⁶ That is the literal Greek of that verse; our modern translations prefer to put it in the positive, saying: "Love must be genuine or sincere."¹⁷ Paul says love is the solution to the problem of pride. When love is evident in a Christian community, the rest of Paul's exhortations both follow *and* make rational sense. He says: "Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another with mutual love, showing eagerness in honoring one another. Do not lazy in zeal, be enthusiastic in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer. Contribute to the needs of God's people, pursue hospitality."¹⁸ All this is our daily "worship" and you can see how practical it is! Notice this *isn't* a list of rules, it is a list of traits that arise from steady, *wholehearted transformation* of those devoted to God.

As I said at the beginning, this passage is appropriate for this time of transition, as we look both back and forward over Labour Day weekend. It is an opportunity to look back with gratitude as well as being reminded of the big picture as we re-enter the fray of school and work. We all know 2020 has been particularly challenging because of the pandemic, but that's not the only factor. There are a lot of stressors in society that can pull a community apart if we allow it. Whether those tensions arise from racism, work-place practices, social polarization and political dissatisfaction, or not knowing who or what to trust, or life's uncertainties and unknowns, or whatever, Paul is right in that our *thinking* affects our behaviour. What changes might we need to make in our thinking? I'll leave you to ponder on that.

Paul's exhortation for church life is good for any community, work environment, and for society as a whole.¹⁹ *Unity* is vital; *love* is indispensable. These characteristics and attitudes emerge, says Paul, as our *thinking* is transformed by God's Spirit. On this weekend of transition let us pause and *reflect* on our metamorphosis into belonging to Christ and his body, the Church. And having an honest and sober assessment of ourselves, let us *continue* forward by resisting what is evil and clinging to what is good. Being devoted to one another with mutual love and respect. By not being lazy, but being enthusiastic in generosity, hospitality and service to God. And as we go forward, may we "Rejoice in the Christian hope so we can endure in suffering and be persistent in prayer." Amen.

¹⁶ Rom 12:9. See also 1 Cor 12.

¹⁷ Rom 12:9; NRSV, NIV (or "real" NTE).

¹⁸ Rom 12:9b-13.

¹⁹ Paul goes on in Rom 12:14-13:14 to consider the church's relationship with members of wider society.