

“Dancing Spirit”

Sunday, August 27th, 2017

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 12:1-8 (MSG)

Around the year 58CE, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. His use of language reflects the common usage of the time. To help us hear this text for our time, I want to use The Message translation this morning. You may follow along in whatever translation you brought with you.

Paul writes:

So, here’s what I want you to do, God helping you:

Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.

Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.

Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you.

Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you.

The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

In this way, we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around.

The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body.

But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we?

So, since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

If you preach, just preach God's Message,
nothing else;

if you help, just help, don't take over;

if you teach, stick to your teaching;

if you give encouraging guidance,

be careful that you don't get bossy;

if you're put in charge, don't manipulate;

if you're called to give aid to people in distress,

keep your eyes open and be quick to respond;

if you work with the disadvantaged,
don't let yourself get irritated with them or
depressed by them.

Keep a smile on your face.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

Most good golfers will tell you that the key to any
good shot is the follow-through after you hit the
ball.

The same is often said by good bowlers; the
number of pins you knock down is often
determined by your follow-through after you
release the ball onto the lane.

I could take this image further into the sports world
by talking about quarterbacks and pitchers who
know how critical it is to follow-through after
they release the ball.

If you talk to an actor or a dancer, you will hear a similar discussion about follow-through.

The best stage actors recognize that their performance must extend beyond them to reach the person in the very back row, both with their voice and their emotion.

The performance must become an extension of the actor and reach across the entire theater.

As noted on the front of our bulletin today, great dancers realize that they dance through every extension of movement so that the spirit of their dancing reaches every audience member in a meaningful way.

What is common to all of these images is that none of these people is born with the ability to accomplish their desired follow-through.

They must practice their follow-through for countless hours to make it second-nature to their performance.

The spiritual extension of self into the world should be a natural part of our embodied faith; getting there takes lots of practice.

Let us pray... Lord, this morning we are faced with a challenge from Paul to find new ways to live out our faith as active members of the Body of Christ. Help us to learn to practice more so that we may become extensions of your Spirit into the world. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

So, this text from Paul starts off with language that may be hard for contemporary Americans to reconcile.

The New International Version begins like this:

“...offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.”

That sounds a little like jumping into a volcano to please the gods, not something that our loving Creator would ask from us.

Sacrificing human life to please God doesn't make sense to us and I don't think that is what Paul is talking about here.

What Paul is talking about is how we embody our faith in Jesus; how we give physical form to the idea of our faith in God.

So, what does “*embodied faith*” look like?

Being present, experiencing faith, loving others, not just talking about it.

That is what “*living sacrifice*” means to us today.

Your body is holy and acceptable to God.

Change the context and see how we live the fullness of our faith.

We no longer see sacrifice as “*slaughter*”; we now see sacrifice as “*service*”.

The sacrifice God wants is not a dead animal, but your living body acting out your faith, living as a member of the Body of Christ; *being* the image of God in the world.

These eight verses present a practical theology that shows us how to practice love in our households of faith and toward the culture in which we live.

Going through this text, we hear useful truth about what we must do to avoid being conformed to this world and be transformed.

Paul calls us to offer every ordinary moment of our lives to God – sleeping, eating, working – all of it. Instead of moaning about not getting enough sleep, rejoice that you woke up in God’s creation this morning.

Instead of rolling over to sleep-in on Sunday morning, get up with enthusiasm at the thought of your opportunity to worship and thank God today.

Rather than complain about what’s in the ‘fridge to snack on, be thankful that you have groceries and the ability to share your bounty with others.

You get where I’m going with this, right?

Every part of our life can be lived as disappointing drudgery, or we can embrace every single moment as a gracious gift from God.

“Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God.” (v1)

This sort of living is contrary to what the world around us tends to advocate; it is easy to get distracted by this world and get too comfortable with it.

There is a lot of pressure to conform to society; to look alike, think alike, and act alike.

Paul suggests that we avoid conforming so that God can transform us into what we are intended to be.

“Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.” (v2)

God fosters maturity within us so that we might be able to realize that this is not all about us.

Paul cautions us against arrogance.

He tells us not to think too highly of ourselves and understand ourselves by who God is and by what he does for us, not by who we are and what we do for God.

When it comes to God, “*we ain’t all that.*”

Which brings us to “*community in the Body of Christ.*”

This text makes it clear that we are all individuals, gifted by God for specific things.

By God’s grace alone, we are able to discern our gifts and find ways to use them.

It is vital that we recognize that our gifts are intended for the benefit of God’s community; they are not simply things that make us “*special*”.

Our participation in the Body of Christ is critical to our understanding here.

We must balance our view between God’s grace and our own initiative.

God's grace is more than a simple gift, it is a call to spiritual transformation that elicits a response from us.

We may find ourselves unconcerned about the world around us.

Too much reliance on our initiative in the process may cause us to forget that our transformation through grace happens so that we might discern the will of God.

These gifts are not ours to hoard; they are God's, given to us so that we might share them.

And, our God's gifts are intended to be used with the gifts of others to reach a hurting world with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We must also realize that none of this sets us above those who have yet to come into the Body of Christ.

“If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; (that one's for me!)

if you help, just help, don't take over; (There's a great book out called, "***Helping Without Hurting***") that guides us how to do short-term mission without damaging the self-esteem of those we seek to help. This would be a good study for some of our church members to tackle.)

if you teach, stick to your teaching; (If we're going to teach our children that it's important to attend church regularly, set the example by actually attending. If we're going to teach our kids to treat others with respect, don't be rude, or tell racist jokes, or otherwise portray hypocrisy.)

if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; (To encourage someone doesn't mean to tell them how to do everything. Guide, don't push; affirm, don't stifle.)

if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; (When you are called to lead a committee or a project, don't abuse your power by manipulating the

situation to suit your personal agenda. Let others help, even if that means relinquishing some of the glory to another person.)

if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; (We need to be observant and do our best to notice when someone is hurting or in need. It is often difficult for some people to ask for help; try to honor their pride and offer without being asked. Notice opportunities for mission. Be quick to volunteer for projects like Partners In Education.)

if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. (Take a lesson from our youth who visit at Greentree. It would be so easy for these kids to be impatient or annoyed by their elders who move slower than they do. But, they are eager to serve and to comfort and to love these precious seniors.)

Keep a smile on your face. (I think this goes right along with the idea that “*God loves a cheerful giver;*” God loves to see us serve with a smile on our face.

“So, since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let’s just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren’t.” (v6)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**