

Pentecost 15- Year A
24 August 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Romans 12:1-8

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

For well over two months now, our Sunday morning Epistle readings have come from Paul's Letter to the churches in Rome. This letter is the fifth book in the New Testament; it's the first letter we find after the four gospels; and it's the longest letter in the New Testament.

Paul's Letter to the Romans has been described as the "most commanding exposition of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith ever written." This letter has had an immense impact on generations of ordinary believers as well as on revolutionary Christian thinkers like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Karl Barth.

But if you've read Romans before or if you've been listening the past few Sundays, you know that this is not an easy letter to understand. Paul's writing here is dense, to say the least. There are long and complicated sentences, expressing complex thoughts.

It is the last letter written by the apostle Paul that we have in our Bible. In many ways, it is a summary, the culmination, of Paul's missionary message. The final, mature expression of Paul's theology, if you will. Taking on Paul's Letter to the Romans is not for the faint of heart or the casual student of scripture. Even serious biblical scholars can be intimidated by it.

With that being said, we're going to jump right into the epistle reading for today, because I think the first two verses of today's reading – Romans, Chapter 12, verses 1-2, are critical for us as

Christians. They were critical to the believers in first century Rome to whom Paul was writing, and they are critical to us today.

Chapter 12 is the “hinge” for Paul’s Letter to the Romans. It is a transition from what Paul had been saying in the first 11 chapters of the letter to what he would say in the final 5 chapters.

We get the idea that he’s going to make this transition in the first few words of today’s reading.

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters...

Therefore. A small word that says so much. Watch out! A connection is about to be made, we’re moving from point A to point B, and something big is coming. One biblical scholar has said, “whenever you see ‘therefore’ in the Bible, you’d better duck!”

But, before we get to Point B and see where Paul was headed, let’s back up to what has come before, to Point A and where Paul has come from.

Using the best Greek rhetorical method to build and support his case, Paul formulated the Letter to the Romans to declare the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the reconciling “power of God for salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16).

In the first 11 chapters, Paul announced God’s radical grace in Jesus. Grace that was extended to all – to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul asserted the guilt of all humanity, the impossibility of human beings attaining salvation apart from God’s grace, and the unconditional love and mercy of God, evidenced in Jesus Christ.

In Romans, Chapter 5, Paul stated his point clearly.

But God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (5:8)

So, with that simplified - but I hope accurate – summary of Point A, the first 11 chapters of Romans, we come to the transition to Point B, today’s reading.

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

And, here is that important transition – the place where Paul moved from Point A to Point B, from his belief about God’s grace and salvation for all to how he thought this belief should play itself out in the daily lives of Christians.

In this transition, this “therefore,” Paul asserted the complete claim of the gospel on the whole person.

“Present your bodies.” The Greek word for body that Paul used here is *soma* – present your bodies, not only your physical bodies, but your whole selves.

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” While keeping the Jewish law required the offering of animal sacrifices on the temple altar, Paul - who had been well-schooled in the Hebrew scriptures - knew that repentance and devotion to God is the real meaning of sacrifice. In Paul’s words, we hear echoes of the Psalms and our own Eucharistic Prayers.

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High...Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Our lives are offered up before God not as sacrifices to placate an angry God but as thank offerings in grateful response to a generous and gracious God.

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice ... which is your spiritual worship.” The King James Version of the Bible translated “spiritual worship” as “reasonable service.” The Greek word Paul used was *logikos*. Because of God’s great mercy and grace to us, in spite of our sinfulness, it is only logical that we give our whole selves, a living sacrifice of devotion, to God. I particularly like this translation of the verse.

...offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people.

In response to all God has done for us, even when we haven’t deserved it, it is only logical and sensible and reasonable to say “thank you” with all we are and all we have.

And, what will be the result as we present our whole selves as living “thank yous” to God?

Paul told us the answer to that question in the 12th Chapter of Romans - we will be transformed. We will see ourselves and the world differently. We will have a new mind-set, a new perspective.

Now, Paul is very clear that this transformation is not something that we do. Paul's injunction was to "be transformed" not to "transform yourselves."

The transformation Paul was talking about, the renewing of our minds that will enable us to discern the will of God, is itself a gift from God, not the accomplishment of human beings. Paul wasn't writing some sort of "self-help" manual or giving some general moralistic advice here.

No, Paul was writing about grace that abounds more and more. God's grace is the gift that never ends. God's gift of grace and mercy makes it only logical that we give our whole selves as a living sacrifice to God.

And, what is God's response to this living sacrifice we offer? More grace. Grace to be transformed, grace to renew our minds, grace to discern what God would have us do in the world.

Now, today, I think we will see a very concrete, practical example of how this works. At the end of our worship today, we will go to our Hillcrest apartment to ask God's blessing on that home and on all those who will live there in the future.

Members of this parish have given time and effort, material possessions and prayers so this apartment will be not just habitable, but so it will be welcoming and supportive for a family who needs a safe place to call home and a safe place, with God's help, to change their lives.

In Paul's language, I think this apartment has become one more altar in our life as a parish where we can present ourselves – individually and collectively - as a living sacrifice in response to a generous and gracious God. A God who has showed us – individually and collectively – unmerited mercy and grace. This is our spiritual worship. Our reasonable service.

And, in return, this generous and gracious God is transforming us. Transforming us as we work together. Transforming us as we work with the folks from St. Paul's Church. Transforming us as we will come to know the families who will live in this apartment. Transforming us as we step out into the world.

God renewing our minds - making us a people who see the world differently. A people who will be more and more enabled to discern God's will and to follow where God leads us, to show God's unbounded grace and mercy that the apostle Paul wrote about to a world that needs it so very much.

AMEN.