

Sermon on Romans 12: 1-8 15

Sometimes the body of Christ gets heartburn

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St. Mark's, Ocean Park

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Dear Friends, dear brothers and sisters, I'm here to say that the Apostle Paul has cracked the nut of congregational development.

I expect that after my colleagues at the synod office read today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, they will set about phasing out my position as Missioner for Parish Development. In fact, I don't know why they didn't figure this out on their own, because Paul lays it out pretty clearly: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ. ... We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us."

It's simple: All we need to do is figure out our gifts, and Bob's your uncle.

Oh, you think maybe there's more to it than that? Well, ok, there is a bit of a back story.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters"

Paul's big idea in the letter to the Romans is that God, through Jesus, has solved the pervasive and intractable problem of the human condition: Sin. Sinfulness primarily takes the form of idolatry, of neglecting our relationship with God in favour of this world's distractions. In Jesus's death, God has taken action and offers us a gift—pure grace. This gift is extended to all people, to Jews and Gentiles. All we need to do is to trust God, to respond with faith.

All of that is what lies behind the “therefore.” God through Jesus has made this tremendous act of love, has repaired the separation between us. So—therefore—what does this mean for our lives? What do we do with this gift?

Paul says to the whole community, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” This would be a bit of a head scratcher back then because sacrifices were pretty much dead by the time the sacrifice was complete. Rather, Paul is asking his listeners to orient *all* of their lives, all of themselves, to God, every day. This is what it means to be a living sacrifice. Worship is not limited to one place or one time, but is to be our daily practice.

And further, Paul is inviting us to be changed, to be transformed, by taking on a new way of thinking. This new way of thinking is to aim to have the mind, the attitude, the orientation, of Christ. We do this so that we might grasp what God wants for us. Jesus models for us how to be with God, how to be oriented to God, how to discern God’s will.

Next Paul says, Don’t be a fathead. *You’re not all that and a bag of chips.* That’s my paraphrase. Actually, the words are “I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.” On an individual level, that’s pretty self explanatory, although I wonder about the members of the community who don’t think highly enough of themselves, who sell themselves short. I think it might also have to do with Christians who think that their faith makes them better than others, or who are prideful because of their wonderful community. So our response to God’s grace is to dedicate our lives *everyday*, to be transformed. But it doesn’t end there. Because followers of Jesus have always walked this way in community. The Christian way is always practiced with others.

Its not the sort of thing you can do on your own. So it is not just that each of us is transformed, individually, but also that our community is transformed—our community changes—in response to God’s desire for us, for our common lives. We are changed and our faith community is changed as God brings out the best in us.

And Paul was particularly instrumental in inviting Gentiles to join this way, which in his time was particularly counter-cultural. Back then Jews were Jews and Gentiles were Gentiles, and never the two should meet. Furthermore, in the new Christian communities, both Jews and Gentiles were equally beloved. So part of the challenge that Paul is engaging is to help this new people do something new—to live together.

And here Paul uses a metaphor that he also uses in a couple of his other letters: We Jesus followers are like a body, and a body has many members with different functions. We have gifts that are different but, Paul implies, all equally necessary and valuable (except possibly for the appendix).

Which brings me back to my opening remarks, that Paul has cracked the nut of congregational life. In a way it really is that simple: We respond to God’s love by dedicating our lives to God. Part of this means discerning God’s will for us, discerning our gifts, and offering these in community. Also respecting that others have different gifts and that all are necessary.

But Paul overlooks a few details—like heartburn and arthritis. I’m being a bit facetious, but I’m also completely serious. I get to see a fair amount of congregational heartburn in my work. I know, as most of you know, that working together in community is easier said than done. We don’t always respect or have confidence in others’ gifts, and our gifts are not always respected. In short,

sometimes people can get on our nerves something fierce. Sometimes we reckon that they are the appendix and it's time for surgery, before something ruptures. Sometimes we struggle to discern what God wants, and factions develop. These are not veiled comments about St. Mark's. I'm talking about every single community that has ever existed, including the early church. Being community is deeply challenging. Christ may have overcome sin on a fundamental, existential level, but we are not yet perfect, not while we're this side of the veil. One image for the church is "a hospital for sinners." I really resonate with that image. But this is where the grace comes into it for me. Because if we can stay the course, if we can commit to being together and working through differences, we *are* transformed. We learn to see the face of Christ in the most unlikely places. It *is* that simple, and at the same time deeply challenging.

Paul includes another element in his image of the body. He says "we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another." We are members of one another. I'm not quite sure what this means, but for me it evokes profound interdependence. We don't just complement each other in our different gifts, we *need* each other.

I couldn't help but think of a well-known part of a meditation from the Anglican poet priest John Donne, written almost four hundred years ago, in 1624:

No man is an island, entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were. As well as if a manor of thine own or of thine friend's were. Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind.

Donne says that no person is an isolated island—we are all part of the mainland. If one little lump is washed into the sea, the whole continent is affected in the same way as if a big cliff was washed away, or if your home or your friend’s home was washed away. When anyone dies, says Donne, I am less, I am smaller, because “I am involved in mankind.” I think that this is what Paul is getting at when he says that “we are members of one another.”

And now I *am* going to talk briefly about St. Mark’s. You have been through a lot over the years, and in the last few months in particular, navigating your way through an interim period without an interim priest AND during the pandemic while continuing to do the work necessary to bring the right priest to join you. You have stayed the course. You are staying the course.

Dear friends, I commend you for being here. For turning up in person and online. Because—strangely enough—that is part of our response to God’s unending love and grace. We are invited to orient *all* of our lives, all of ourselves, to God, every day. And we are called to do this with others. We are called to be interdependent and to recognize the value of each other person. Mostly that happens easily, but sometimes it feels like heartburn.

So I’m back to where I began.

I think Paul is right.

It is that simple.

Not easy—but simple.

Thanks be to God.