

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Giving Completely”
The Rev. Joanne Blair
October 14, 2018

We are spending September-November in Paul’s 1st and 2nd letters to the church in Corinth ... except for today, where we visit his letter to the church in Rome. Paul did not found the church in Rome, nor had he visited it yet at the time of this letter. There is no one distinct issue or problem that Paul feels the need to address, and so this letter is the closest thing to Paul’s theological dissertation. He is also paving the way for financial support of the Church, which fits with our 3-week miniseries on “Giving.”

In the early Church, Jews, as well as Jewish and Gentile Christians lived together somewhat uncomfortably, as they struggled with various cultures, traditions and rituals. And our scripture today is from that section of Paul’s letter which deals with practical questions about life and living.

Listen for God speaking as we read Romans 12:1-5

Still in Second Temple time, the Jewish people came to the temple in Jerusalem to give offerings and make sacrifices as an act of worship. This involved bringing vegetables, money and other valuable items. Grains and incense were burned, and certain animals were killed. Some of this was to help with the cost of running the temple and support the needs of the priests and temple workers. And some of this served for purification, reparation, guilt and atonement. Offering sacrifices was an important part of the Jewish religion, as well as other religions of Paul’s day ... and these practices were still very prevalent in society.

If you look up the difference between offering and sacrifice in theological dictionaries, you get varied definitions, opinions, and applications. Most common is the concept that “offering” means the giving of something. And “sacrifice” involves the killing of an animal. In today’s world, we attach a negative connotation to the word “sacrifice”, and we associate it with death, suffering, or depletion. Paul is challenging the church in Rome, and us today, with the concept of sacrifice. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Paul never forgets that we are embodied creatures. Everything we think, say, or do... we do in a body. And Paul is calling us to a commitment ... a commitment of the whole of our selves ... to be worked out by a new way of thinking and behaving. Paul’s words are a call to action ... enacted by absolutely everything we think, say and do.

Even more, Paul is calling us to be transformed. We often come up with plans to transform ourselves – diets and exercise ... even meditation and prayer. Obviously, all of these can be good. The problem exists when we try to control and dictate them for our own purposes rather than God’s purpose.

Paul is not urging us to transform ourselves. Rather, he is appealing to us open ourselves up to be transformed by God. We live in a secular world, but we are not to be trapped and molded by it. “Do not be conformed to this world” ... do not be pressed into a mold dictated by an external force. “But be transformed by the renewing of your minds” ... allow God to change your inward reality.

We are to be Christ-centered, not self-centered. And we do this not just hoping for what God will do. We do this by giving the whole of ourselves to God in grateful response to what God has already done. If we truly recognize what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, then our only response is to give ourselves completely to God. And we do it out of gratitude and are filled with joy.

Martin Luther once said that “we are little Christs. That people see in our lives a little piece of Christ.” Paul warns us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Just last week John talked about Paul “de-puffing” the church in Corinth. Personally, I find Martin Luther’s calling us “little Christs” to be humbling indeed.

Some of us struggle to feel worthy of being called “the hands and feet of Christ in the world today.” Yet we are. But we can only be the authentic body of Christ if we have offered the whole of ourselves to God. And we can only be the Body of Christ if we come together. We do not just live as individuals in our individual bodies. Together we make up the Body of Christ ... as a community and as the Church.

Although I’ve misplaced the source, a study found that the main reason people remain part of a Christian congregation is because of the quality of love that they experience in human relationships. The music, preaching, mission, or children’s and youth programs may be why they join ... but the loving friendships and relationships is why they stay. It is not the ideals of love they long for ... it is genuine love in human form- with Christ in the center.

I come to worship on Sunday and am involved in this community not just because I work here, but because centering myself in the act of worship and being in community with all of you helps me stay grounded. This community (you!) helps me to stay open to continually be transformed by God. And you help shield me from those ways of the world that do not matter. For worship is not just coming here on Sunday mornings ... it’s offering our whole self to God ... and we need the support of each other to do that.

An individual cannot do it all, and even a community cannot do it all. But I can do, and you can do, and this community can do what God calls us to do.

It’s no secret that we are in our season of stewardship. And I hope you will prayerfully and gratefully think about your pledge for the coming year. This community does so much inside and outside of these walls thanks to your generosity of time, talents and treasures. And I hope that whatever you pledge, you do it with joy. But even more than your pledges, I hope you will each offer yourself to God as a “living sacrifice”, so that you may continue to be transformed by God.

“What does it mean to be a living sacrifice?” asked a woman to her pastor. Holding out a blank sheet of paper, the pastor replied, “It is to sign your name at the bottom of this blank sheet, and let God fill it in as God will.” Every common thought, action and deed is an act of worship. Our entire way of life is meant to live in relationship with God and each other.

Who here remembers the Hokey Pokey? You put different parts of your body in, you shake it all about, and then you turn yourself around. In the last verse, you put your whole-self in. Well, I’d like to suggest that we all do the Hokey Pokey with God. That we put our whole-selves in, open ourselves up and shake it all about ... and let God turn us around and transform us.

God doesn’t just want our hearts, or our minds, or our gifts, or our actions. God wants all of us.

And so the challenge for us this week is to ask ourselves:

- Am I living my whole life as an offering to God?
- And am I joining that offering with others to build up the Body of Christ?