

“Spiritual Worship”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 23, 2020

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 124

Rev. John Wahl

Romans 12:1-8

For the next four weeks – this Sunday and the following three – we will be looking at the latter part of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In the first eleven chapters, Paul wrote to Christians in the Empire’s capital city about the presence, the work, and the calling of God in Christ upon the entire human family – Jew and Gentile. He seeks to persuade this community of converts to live not according to the political ideologies of Rome – and the expectations of bowing down before a panoply of gods and idols, including the Emperor – but, rather, to live out their faith based on what God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

The life to which Paul calls Christians in Rome – which applies to Christians in the 21st century as well – is a holy life, acceptable to God: one through which all that one says and does is governed by sacrificial living. To worship the God that Paul proclaims in this letter, and that is presented throughout scripture, is to adopt the principles of humility and self-denial.¹

In the face of idols that demand our devotion and sacrifice, worship of the one, true God means nothing less than the giving of one’s total self as a ‘living sacrifice.’ The spiritual is not in opposition to the bodily; or, put another way, spiritual worship is bodily worship. For Paul, worship is always full-bodied; it happens in the context of community as we live out our faith by serving one another to build up the body of Christ. The quality of our worship is not measured by what happens only on Sundays, but by what happens when we are together, or at work for one another, Monday through Saturday.

When Paul says, ‘You are the body of Christ’ he doesn’t mean that the church literally is Christ’s body in every way, without errors or flaws. He means instead that the church is a body that belongs to Christ; that gives it Jesus a face to the world as his voice, his hands, and his feet. The body is an apt metaphor for how the church can, should, and even does work together. It’s a better example than family or team: you can opt out from being the member of a team; you can go

¹ Israel Kamudzundu from *WorkingPreacher.com*

on vacation without your family; but you can't take a break from the parts of your body.²

Members of the body of Christ offer holy, living, and spiritual worship not by sacrificing the carcass of an animal, not by bowing down before some carved idol, and not even by working as individuals to resist being conformed to this world. We worship by practicing the kind of gift-sharing that Paul outlines here: as leaders and teachers, as cheerful and compassionate givers. An embodied community is one in which the gifts of others are valued, and each member uses their gifts on behalf of the body as a whole. This is spiritual worship; this is sacrifice which is living, holy, and acceptable to God.

The kind of thinking that Paul commends – ‘not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment’ – is a combination of imagination and action. Paul says that it involves both brain and body. Imagine working – as many of you have done – to move the large rack of folding chairs that is in our Fellowship Hall. It requires a plan, a theory (I think this will work if you push from the back while I steer from the front); you have to share at least some common vision, to be of ‘one mind’ on the nature of the task and its execution.

Even so, as vital as it might be, imagination does not move the chairs. Action – pushing, pulling, steadying – is required too, as are mid-course corrections and communication. This is common work in which people – parts of the body – with different functions share, if only for a few moments, the same mind.

Such shared imagination-in-action certainly does not discount the difficulties of living with and among others. Sometimes, chairs fall off the racks, frustration builds, and tempers flare (to say nothing of what can happen when church people set up some of those chairs and sit down for a meeting!). Paul knows the difficulties of living in community, and yet he refuses to try to solve them by ranking some chair movers as more important than others, or by imagining that giftedness means that same thing for everyone. In fact, it does not; by design, the body includes members with different, but necessary, gifts.³

Paul is sometimes considered to be the original master of hyperbole – claiming that he is the greatest of all disciples, and that no-one has suffered the way that he has. But, here in this passage, he reminds his readers – and maybe, at the same time, himself – to remain humble. For, we are all members of one body;

² Alyce McKenzie, “Many Members, One Body” from *Patheos.com*

³ Mary Hinkle Shore from *WorkingPreacher.com*

though not all having the same function, we are interconnected with one another in mind and body.

Paul never forgets that we are embodied creatures. Everything we think, say, or do; we do it in a body. Offering our bodies as holy sacrifices means staying aware each day that our body is the primary location in which we express our heart and soul, our strength and mind. If we want to understand our inmost motives and values, we can look at what we do each day in our bodies – how are we feeding and resting, stretching and moving? Over time, our actions and choices create a body of work, so to speak. Essentially, our body of work is the body – the offering, the living sacrifice – that Paul is talking about.

The goal, therefore, is to have a body – a body of work – that is a living, breathing, and daily offering to God. We live in a society that inundates us with advertising designed to keep us conformed to this world. The marketing/media industry spends billions of dollars each year to flood our televisions and websites, bill-boards and mailboxes – virtual and physical. They seek to define us as consumers: economic units existing for the sake of market shares. Each day, we are pressured to fit in, to stay within the bounds of tradition or practice which mark us as who we're supposed to be.

Not being conformed to this world is therefore a tall order. The world will fight at every turn to convince us to look the other way rather than see the injustice, greed, and oppression that surrounds us. It takes transformation – a true renewal of the mind – to detach ourselves from the world's attempts to occupy us with things that do not matter. Paul implores us to fend off the efforts of this world and attend to the things that do matter; to “discern...the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect.” (v. 2)

Paul also never forgets that we do not just exist as individuals in our individual bodies. We live as members of the body of Christ; and God enables that body to create its own body of work – ministry and teaching, encouraging and giving, leading and showing compassion. We can do some of these things alone, but we can do them with greater discernment and impact as part of a larger body. None of us can do it all. No single community can do it all, either. But God has empowered each community to do what it is called to do in its particular context.⁴

Our lives as disciples of Christ are a journey from seeing ourselves as independent bodies to seeing ourselves also as members of the body of Christ. This is spiritual worship: living into our identity not as self-contained bodies, but

⁴ Rochelle Stackhouse from *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 3

as members of Christ's body. We grow into that identity as we increase in empathy for other members of the body: recognizing their varied gifts; discovering ways to fuse imagination and action; thinking of ourselves not more highly than we should, but being transformed by a renewed mind. So, when another part of the body suffers, we feel it too, and offer encouragement and support. The result of relating to the member of a group in this way – to offering ourselves in spiritual worship – is a more healthy body.

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.” (v. 5) Thanks be to God. Amen.