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Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>15</sup>[Jesus] said to them, “But who do *you* say that I am?” <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And so it is that Peter crosses a kind of threshold. For the one who acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah thereby acknowledges that Jesus has a claim on his soul, on her soul — aye, a claim that matters more than anything else.

With the word “Messiah,” Peter distinguishes Jesus from all others. Some folk praise Jesus, but their praise is according to the ordinary scale of things.

<sup>14</sup>And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”(Matthew 16, NRS)

High praise, yes, especially to be likened to Jeremiah, who is probably my favorite prophet. But Peter is going beyond such commendation. For in acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, Peter leaves behind all ordinary terms of praise and condemnation. With his Great Confession, Peter puts into words that he has found his Saviour.

It is as when a man says to that one who has captured his heart, “Thou art my wife. Thou art my beloved. You are distinguished in my eyes from all others. You are precious to me, and there is no going back. There is no future for me apart from you!”

So it is with Peter: Along with the rest of the disciples and the rest of the church through all the long ages since, Peter confesses that he has found his Lord. There is no going back. Henceforth, he walks with Jesus.

So Peter did this good thing: he gave his Great Confession concerning Jesus. And what, now, of you, what now of me? You have heard what Peter said. You have heard him cross the threshold and claim Jesus as his Christ. Now, what do you say?

I press the question of you and of me and of our faith, because it is not quite enough that Bethlehem’s angels should break into song and acclaim Jesus as this world’s Saviour, for, is he also your Saviour, my Saviour? And it is not quite enough that St. Peter should have believed, along with St. Paul and all the apostolic band, for the question remains, Do *you* believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God? It is not quite enough that St. Francis should believe, along with St. Augustine, St. Chrysostom, blessed Martin Luther, Mother Theresa, and all the faithful people of the past, for we must not neglect ourselves: Do we also acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Saviour? And it is not enough that mother

should believe or that dear old dad should believe, for if you were blessed with faithful parents or grandparents or other faithful folk in your life, they wonder and hope and pray about you, about me: Do we also believe in Jesus?

Probably you believe in Jesus more than you can ever say, ever explain. But the adventure and the fun of these threescore and ten years granted to us on this earth is that we should believe in Jesus with increasing focus and dedication.

And for this Jesus himself is a help, as is St. Paul after him.

Soon after Peter's Great Confession, Jesus explains to Peter and the other disciples the extraordinary meaning of their faith in him: Their faith in him means many good and pleasant things, including hope of heaven and fullness of life even here below. But also their faith means this: it means the Cross. Can't be helped! Peter believes in a Man who is so good and so bent on saving this world, that he is willing to pour out his strength, even his body and blood, all the way to emptiness. Jesus is willing to do good in this world to the very end, with no reservation. He will be undeterred in calling people into God's kingdom. Though the Cross threatens, Jesus means to persevere. And those who claim Jesus as their Messiah must be willing to take up their own cross and follow him.

This is where St. Paul comes into our story. In this morning's Epistle Lesson, the apostle urges Christians to be true to Jesus, not only in their souls, but also with their bodies:

<sup>1</sup>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.(Romans 12:1, NRS)

What an image this is! Here, St. Paul speaks of us as priests offering sacrifices, except that the sacrifice we offer is not some poor lamb or dove, but rather our own ourselves! We are to present our bodies as a "living sacrifice," but with this wondrous reversal compared to the priest of olden days. The ancient priest offered a sacrifice by killing the creature and offering it to God. But we are to do the reverse: we are to offer our bodies to God, and in the offering, to find life for ourselves.

Echoes of St. Paul's exhortation can be found in our liturgy. Sunday by Sunday, we step into our priestly role in that part of the liturgy called the "Offertory Prayer." How many times now, have we prayed this great prayer? Many of us know it by heart, and well we should:

A Let us pray. Merciful Father,  
C we *offer* with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us--*ourselves*, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love.  
Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us,  
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This great Offertory Prayer could well be our morning prayer, day by day: We offer ourselves, our time, our possession, our very bodies, as living sacrifices to our God.

And how is the body to become a sacrifice? In this final section of my sermon, I speak in the spirit and with some of the words of the ancient preachers. Let me begin with St. John Chrysostom<sup>1</sup>:

And how is the body, it may be said, to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look upon no evil thing, and it hath become a sacrifice; let thy tongue speak nothing filthy, and it hath become an offering; let thine hand do no lawless deed, and it hath become a whole burnt offering. Or rather this is not enough, but we must have good works also: let the hand do alms, the mouth bless them that cross one, and the hearing find leisure evermore for lections of Scripture... Let us then from our hands, and feet, and mouth, and all other members, yield a first-fruit unto God.

For nothing is so old and wearying as vice. Nothing ages us so fast, robs us of strength and reputation, and haunts with hell as those great departures from the life our Maker intended for us: lust, gluttony, sloth, envy, anger, and greed.

For neither can the eye that looks lecherously be sacrificed, nor the hand be presented that is grasping and rapacious, nor the feet that go lame and go to play-houses, nor the belly that is the slave of self-indulgence, and kindleth lusts after pleasures, nor the heart that hath rage in it, and harlots' love, nor the tongue that uttereth filthy things.

Let not the feet, then, trip along to strip clubs, let not the lungs inhale and breathe out pot, let not the imagination dream of revenge, let not the tummy be overlade with fat, let not the deal be unfair, let not the employee be driven to despair.

Rather, let the eye look with love upon your family and upon your neighbors, let your tongue be accustomed to whispering the old prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner," let your body be pure and precious in your own sight that you might offer it to God and to your neighbor as a living sacrifice, a great gift, and cause for joy for others and for the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> From Chrysostom's *Homilies on Romans*, Chapter 12.