

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/24/2014, Pentecost 11A
Romans 12:1-8
Presenting Our Bodies

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

In this morning's Gospel story, Peter makes what is called his "Great Confession." Impetuous Peter, who one day will deny his Lord and fall away from him, here rises to a great height, and speaks for the Twelve Disciples — indeed speaks for each of us:

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Matthew 16:16, RSV)

A week following the resurrection of Jesus, the disciple Thomas repeats this Great Confession, making it his own in his awestruck way:

And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. (John 20:28, KJV)

Now in this morning's Epistle Lesson, Saint Paul teaches us what this confession means for us for daily life.

The apostle has taught his great doctrine of justification by faith in earlier chapters of this letter to the Romans. Most recently he has spoken up for his people, Israel, preaching that the promises of God are irrevocable and holding out the hope that Israel one day will join the church in confessing Jesus as her Lord and Savior (Romans 11). Now, in today's reading, the apostle turns to Christian morality. There is a manner of life appropriate for those who pin their hopes on Jesus. There is a distinctive path in life for us to follow. There is an alternative vision of a good human life for us to offer the world. And so, we come to my text for this morning's sermon. It is from Romans Chapter 12, the first few verses:

¹I 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. ²Do 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.
(Romans 12:1-2, NRSV)

A holy life

My wife, Carol, has earned one academic degree beyond mine. We both have what is called the “Master of Divinity” degree, which is the professional degree needed for ordination in the Lutheran church. Getting that degree requires an undergraduate degree and then four years of seminary study and internship. So, Carol and I both have the MDiv. degree. But she has an additional degree called the “STM.” It is an ancient academic degree called “Master of Sacred Theology.” She earned it back in 2001 at General Theological Seminary here in town — the seminary where our own James Miller is studying these days. Carol’s STM was in the area of “Spiritual Practices” and it authorizes her to serve as what is called a “Spiritual Director.” That means that she helps others in their spiritual lives, especially their lives of prayer.

Let me tell you one sentence from an initial interview Carol had with one of the people she directs. It is all I know, this one line, because the relationship between the Spiritual Director and the directee is highly confidential. But I do know this much: when Carol asked the person why he wanted spiritual direction, he simply answered, “Because I want to live a more holy life.” Then, I can imagine Carol smiling and thinking to herself, “Now we are getting somewhere. I will be glad to work with this person.”

What is a “holy life?” It is a life surrendered to God and dedicated to him. It is not a perfect life, nor even a sinless life, for I fear that none of us will be capable of that till we reach heaven. Nor is a “holy life” necessarily a wise or an impressive life in this world. It might have miles to go before it is thought that way – as wise or impressive in this world. Rather, a holy life is one that has been turned over to the Lord for the Lord to make of as he will.

There is a fascinating line in Martin Luther’s commentary on this morning’s Romans reading in which Luther suggests that the key thing in life is the *direction* in which we are walking. Either we are walking *toward* Jesus or we are walking *away*.

For this life is the road to heaven or to hell. No one is so good that he does not become better, and no one so evil that he does not become worse, until at last we come to our final state. (LW 25:435)

So, if we are on the road to hell, let’s turn around. It’s only going to get worse. So, let’s turn toward Christ. A holy life is one that counts Jesus the most important person in this world and desires to draw even closer to him and to his ways.

To use the language of Saint Paul, a “holy life” is not one that has arrived at perfection, but one which is “pressing” on toward the high mark:

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because

Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14, NRSV)

A “holy life” is one that is in the process of being transformed by the “renewing of the mind”:

²Do 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.

It has the movement away from ordinary desires toward Christ and his ways. A holy life has a beauty about that can only be explained by heaven. “This person must believe in Jesus. There is no accounting for him, for her, otherwise.”

It should be the eager desire of each of us that we will live a more holy life. Jesus desires that of us. St. Paul calls for it in this morning’s Bible reading. He seeks to persuade us to live a life worthy of the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

In our text Saint Paul speaks of three matters: (1) a sacrificial life, (2) conformity to Christ rather than to the world, and (3) and humility, especially a humble walk with the Lord in the church.

So, let’s look at these three in order: a sacrificial life, conformity to Christ, and humility before God and others, especially in the church.

A sacrificial life

One commentator on this morning’s passage observes that Saint Paul has coined a phrase and a seeming paradox with his notion that we are to present our bodies as a “living sacrifice.”¹ Sacrifices in the ancient world were *killed* — both in Israel and in the pagan world. And sacrifices were not of oneself, but of something else — a lamb or a turtledove or so on. But St. Paul says that we are to offer ourselves to God in a way that does not require our own death — indeed, we should believe that this kind of living sacrifice, far from meaning our death, means a better and fuller life for us even now.

Still, the word “sacrifice” has the inevitable means of surrendering something dear to us. It is no sacrifice if we are giving something we are inclined to toss away anyway. How, then, do present ourselves as a “living sacrifice” to God. Let me begin with the great words of St. John Chrysostom:

¹ Daniel Price, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings*, page 117.

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. (Chrysostom, Homily on Romans 12)

In Martin Luther's commentary on this passage, he notes that the fundamental sacrifice we must make is of our self-will. By this, I think Luther means our own initial impulses, our own initial inclinations, our initial estimate of things unchecked by asking about the will of God. What we should seek is that our lives will be "holy," set apart and dedicated to the Lord. Whatever our first instincts are, a holy life is one that in practice seeks the will of the Lord. A great example of this, Luther says, is Mary, the mother of our Lord. When Gabriel announces to her that she is going to conceive a baby, who could have blamed her for having a flood of impulses: fear, confusion, refusal? But she offers herself to God as a "living sacrifice" with her calm reply to the angel:

³⁸And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. (Luke 1:38, KJV)

Back in the day, Janice Joplin would sing,

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

But a Christian is one who follows Mary in her self-surrender to the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.

Conformity to Christ

The second element of Saint Paul's exhortation follows rather naturally from the first. If we are going to present ourselves as "living sacrifices" to God, then we are going to have to be careful about the lures and ways of the world.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2, KJV)

For a Christian, it is not enough of an excuse to say, “But everyone’s doing it!”

Now, I do not say this easily. I am not casual when I say that the path of the Christian is a different path from that of the world, and that the Christian should study the Bible more than he or she studies the fashions of this age. I am not casual about this because I know how important it can feel to us, especially to young people, that we should fit in. Nobody wants to stick out like a sore thumb. And who wants to miss out on the fun of our own generation and its ways? Yet, Saint Paul dares to ask us to get the ways of the world under control in our lives. He dares to ask us to present the world, including our own generation, another vision of what it means to live a life that is good and strong and lovely. He asks us to be a certain kind of trend-setter: a Christian! Someone who conforms himself or herself to Christ, someone who resembles Jesus in this world.

And so Saint Paul speaks of the “renewing of our minds.” It’s as if, for Saint Paul, our minds had grown old under the weight of trying to keep up with current fashions. Our minds had lost their flexibility, we had entered upon a kind of voluntary senility, surrendering our independence of thought and evaluation and simply going along with the flow. No, the apostle asks us to break free — to break our *minds* free — from the hypnotism of fashion and popular convictions. He asks that by keeping our eye on Jesus, we develop a new kind of mind in this world. Maybe it will be by fits and starts, but Paul asks us to learn to care more about some things in this world that are often neglected, like alms for the poor or self-discipline in eating and drinking, and that we care less other things that might be wildly valued in the world, like excess of alcohol or sex or drugs or conspicuous consumption. Walk your own path, and let it be a path behind Jesus.

Humility

Finally, the apostle has to warn us about the great temptation that faces people who try to walk an independent path in life: the temptation of vainglory and despising others:

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Romans 12:3, RSV)

On the one hand, conforming ourselves to Christ should automatically incline us toward humility, since Jesus was a lowly man. But Saint Paul smoothly moves on from our individual Christian lives to talk of the church because the church is a kind of training ground for holiness. In the church, we are supported by a whole community of people who are trying to present themselves as living sacrifices to the Lord. Furthermore, in the church, we can more easily see and appreciate that it takes many different people and many different kinds of talents to make the church work well. None of us can do everything that needs to be done in the

church. I bet that even Saint Paul would not claim to be the best person around for each and every one of the gifts he mentions in this evening's reading:

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

In today's reading, Saint Paul used the word "body," in two senses. When he urges us to the "present our *bodies* as living sacrifices," he means our personal lives day by day, together with our hopes and dreams and needs and the longings of our dear, old bodies. And when he says that we are "one *body* in Christ" (Romans 12:5, RSV), he means the church. There is a necessary connection between these two: in the end we cannot live a holy life apart from the church. A holy life is always *personal*, but never *private*. A holy life tries to live humbly within the church, mindful that we are but one part of a diversity of gifts that make up the church.

These three, then, are part of Christian morality: that we should be a "living sacrifice" to God, that we should seeking conformity to Christ rather than to the world, and that we should not think "more highly of ourselves than we ought," but walk humbly with our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.