

The Body of Christ in the World
Romans 12: 1-8; August 27, 2017; Union Congregational Church UCC
Rev. Robin Raudabaugh

We live in a world where sound bites are used to communicate complex ideas. Our text from Paul's letter to the Roman church would be so easy to turn into sound bites – perhaps we could even add a meaningful illustration and we'd have a meme: “Loving one another is easier said than done.” Or “Doing love transcends merely speaking of love.” Or “Don't conform, transform.” Or “One body, many members.”

It would be easy to think of this text that way. And we would be missing a lot. We'd be paring complicated ideas down into simplistic quotes. And while those quotes might be good reminders – they aren't the whole thing.

On first reading, today's text from this letter feels so much easier to take than last week's hard words from the gospel of Matthew about toxicity. And part of it is context and part of it is the writers of each text, from where are they writing and their audience.

It's important to remember that Paul, the author of today's letter to the church in Rome, was not a theologian working in an office writing directives and correctives and helping these fledgling congregations with three or five or ten year strategic plans. He wasn't even like me, working in my office, preparing this sermon for you. Paul was out on the road. As he was writing to the Romans, he was most likely on his way to Corinth or Ephesus or any other of the new churches. Paul's letters offering help and advice were far more about daily living than theological concepts and dogma.

So when Paul talks about becoming a living sacrifice – he's not really talking about the old Purity codes from back in Leviticus – but rather that it's about putting your body where your heart is – it's about discerning and living every moment into the will of God. This means we may actually need to do things that will put us in risky places – places outside the norms of behavior for our society.

We are each given specific unique gifts and called by God, Paul says: some of us to be prophets – to speak truth to power; some of us to be ministers – to minister to others. Some to be teachers – some speakers – others leaders – and others doing acts of compassion. And the living sacrifice mentioned by Paul is not in any way meant to be a negative thing. It's not meant to be a giving up difficult thing. It is meant to be a positive, a taking on of something new and exciting, as we live into what God calls each of us to be. And - it's not about you as an individual, Paul reminds – it's about you and the way you fit into the bigger picture – and the ways in which the gifts you've been given fit into and become vitally necessary for the whole. The Gifts of each one are to be used for the common good.

And this recognition of our gifts and our response to that is a delicate balance. This balance between God's grace and calling for each of us (our gifts) and our human initiative (our response) is vital. If we place too much emphasis on God's grace –(this free gift) we can become apathetic about what it means to not be conformed to the world. Too much emphasis on our human initiative (our response) and we forget that we are transformed in order to discern the will of God – the pathway toward what is good and acceptable and perfect and leading to shalom.

In the world, as followers of Christ, Paul reminds us that we will need to take on ways of being – that yes – do use our gifts – but also may be actions that we are not currently taking – and may in fact be actions that place us in precarious, risky places and situations.

When we witness – that is offer our whole selves to the work and will of God - with our whole selves – when we put our bodies on the line – that is what it means to be living sacrifices.

And isn't that exactly what we are being called to be and do at this time in our communities and our world. Aren't we being called to that kind of witnessing – that kind of speaking out – that kind of stepping into difficult places. Aren't we being called to be a corrective to culture – not adapt or give in to a culture gone horribly awry.

Aren't we being called to speak up and speak out and put our bodies into action – against injustice and oppression. Aren't we called to be advocates for anyone who is marginalized because of the color of their skin, their gender, their sexual orientation, their poverty, their immigrant status. And aren't we being called also to walk in that others shoes or skin or reality for at least a little while to remember that our reality is not their reality – that we are not all the same – we do not speak or act or have the same history.

And in the church faithful people will need to let go of the value systems some of us hold so dear - those systems that order relationships hierarchically - and learn to embrace value systems that honor other ways of ordering and respect diversity and many different gifts – many different stories - -- all without destroying the distinctiveness of any one of its valuable members.

The God given gifts of each person in this system are not only present – but needed in order that the living body of Christ might function optimally in the world. It is true that there are many, many ways to use these gifts. It is also true that the gifts are not only for you – the gifts you've been given are for all.

The earlier reminder from Paul to not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by God so that you might discern which way is the will of God – is vital to knowing where and how to use your gifts.

Paul's description of the early churches as a human body with many parts shows up several times in his letters to those early churches, the most common is 1 Corinthians 12: 12 – where Paul talks about how a hand can't tell a foot, I don't need you." We use this body metaphor often in our churches to reinforce the importance of each individual's gifts – no matter what they are - and how necessary they are to the whole - whether it seems immediately obvious or not.

But what if Paul was not speaking metaphorically when he wrote about the body? What if he was speaking metaphysically instead – not making a comparison – but stating a reality instead? He didn't say you are like the body of Christ – he said – you ARE the body of Christ – we who are many – are one body.

Whether you feel it or not, whether you even like each other or not – you are the body of Christ in this world – and there is nothing you can do about it – but act like it – or not.

Quantum physics tells us that we have been living under the illusion of separateness ever since Sir Isaac Newton decided that the universe operated like an enormous clock. God wound the clock – and it has been ticking away ever since – all the individual gears and springs and tiny parts that act in predictable ways – each working and acting in their own predictable ways. You can take them apart and put them back together and the clock will work the same. To understand the clock (and the clockmaker, God) you need only understand the parts – which behave in reasonable and predictable ways.

And for a long time – theologians and scientists both – lived for the most part under this illusion. Until someone had the audacity to wonder if perhaps the universe behaves much more like a body than a clock – that it is not possible to understand the parts without understanding the whole. In fact – scientists realized – we can't even observe a single part without changing the way it functions – the observation itself changes the function - because we are all so absolutely interconnected and knit together in this invisible, almost unimaginable web of relationship.

Quantum physics calls this chaos theory. Some theologians call it Process theology. Paul calls it the body of Christ – the great mystery of God that binds us together whether we know it or feel it or even want it or not.

Over the last couple of weeks, I have had difficulty tearing myself away from Facebook and all the posts of marches and rallies and demonstrators and protestors and prophetic speaking out and statues coming down and hands being raised up. And I'm reminded of the rallies that I've attended, most recently, the Women's March on the Mn. Capitol earlier this spring. I'm also reminded of many PRIDE parades I've marched in with various United Church of Christ churches including with this church.

And I've never been particularly worried about my safety or even the safety of those who are with me, even when I have known it was possible – even probably – that there would be those ones on another side – protesting me. Signs proclaiming, 'God hates faggots.' 'Make our country white again.' 'Jew will not replace us.' 'God sent the shooter.'

And we carried our own signs. 'All are welcome here.' 'Jesus didn't turn anyone away, neither do we.' 'Women's Rights are Equal Rights.' 'Black Lives Matter.' 'Love is Love.'

We've marched – and sang – and prayed – at Prayer Vigils - I've got peace like a river in my soul – and This little light of mine – I'm gonna let it shine – all over the world – I'm gonna let it shine.

And in that moment of togetherness and love – it's hard to have to remember – isn't it – that if what Paul said is true – then God is not waiting for any of us to decide who is in and who is out of Christ's body. The truth is beyond our deciding or consent or even liking. We are all the body of Christ – we each have been given gifts – and we are called not to conform – not to give in to the not-God ways of this world – but to be transformed by it. In the body of Christ, when one suffers, we all suffer. When one is honored, the rest of us rejoice. When one is hate-filled we are hurt. Most of the time though, we act as though this body of Christ thing is a whole bunch of little bodies and we are only a part of the little Union Congregational United Church of Christ body – not the big – whole universal body of Christ. We are all in this together. And the more we act as though we aren't - the more we act as though we are a machine that can be reworked with parts removed and tossed away – instead of a body – a mysterious body – that gets sick and diseased with parts breaking or wearing out – and needing nurturing and compassion and repairing the more we feel disconnected from the whole body.

Quinn Caldwell, pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church UCC of Syracuse NY tells a story that happened earlier this summer at Panama Beach, Florida. Two women visiting the beach heard screams and saw two young boys hundreds of yards out from the shore caught in a rip current. They couldn't get back to shore. There being no lifeguards on duty, the women went out on boogie board to try to save the boys – and got stuck themselves. Other people also attempted rescue and failed until there were nine people caught out in the water in danger of drowning.

That's when the people on shore realized that no single person was going to be able to save them. This was a problem bigger than anyone single person – no matter how strong. So, one by one, ten by ten by ten, they linked arms forming a human chain and made their way out toward the stranded swimmers.

This linking of human bodies made into one super-human body plucked those stranded swimmers from the waters and passed them one by one back to the shore. Not one person died that day on Panama City beach.

There are problems in our world that one human body alone cannot handle – no matter how magnificent the gifts and skills and willingness. There are situations that simply cannot be saved by a single person. There are currents you can never swim your own way out of. That is why we are called to be the church – the body of Christ – in this world. The body of Christ – with all your messy mixture of weird and strange and wonderful and critical and delightful and knowledgeable and silly and passionate and skillful - God-given gifts — combined with God's grace – bringing God's vision of peace with justice for all – for everyone and everything – into this world.

References

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