

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. Do 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.

For 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 assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good.

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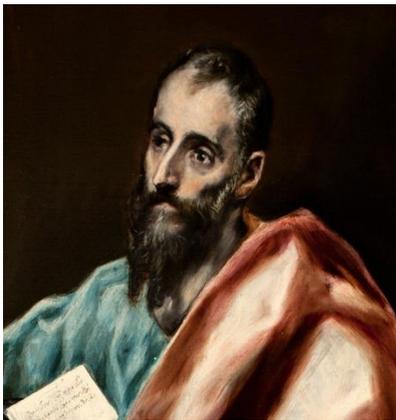
This is our final installment of words from the Apostle Paul as part of our Sizzlin’ Summer Sermon Series for 2019 (not that our sermons won’t continue to ‘sizzle’ throughout the year!) Today we turn to some more of his famous words, from chapter twelve, a portion of which I share in the benediction to you every Sunday at the end of the service.

Paul has been in the midst of a concerted effort to appeal to the hearts and minds of this small gathering of believers in Rome (numbering maybe 250 people, in various house-churches.) He hopes to visit them soon, on his way to Spain (which he is never able to visit.) This is decidedly a ‘mixed group’ of Gentiles and Jews living in a ‘underground’ church, with a fragile toehold in society, struggling against incalculable odds; a hostile government, an

indifferent culture, and potential internal conflicts ready to erupt and unravel this fledgling group from the inside out.

Not much cause for optimism? For Paul, the bigger odds against him, the better. Three issues in particular concerned him most - all of them interrelated.

The first issue concerned his validity as a leader/apostle in the eyes of those to whom he wrote, and also those who opposed him. Paul was not yet famous, he had not walked with Jesus, so he had to work extra hard and be powerfully convincing in his arguments to them to prove himself credible and authoritative.



The second issue concerned the 'church' (ecclesia-assembly) to whom he was writing; their vulnerability and their unity, as diverse as they were, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. How could they hold together? How could they thrive? How could they even survive?

The third concern was about ethics/behavior; how should Christians in Rome respond to foes and even attacks from those who opposed them? This was bound to happen, given their minority status and their 'anti-Roman' stance of not pledging loyalty to the Emperor or even offering up sacrifices to him (which was a criminal offense.)

There's lots to cover here- so here we go! Increasingly and importantly, these three issues are still applicable to us as a Christian community, even 20 centuries after the ink of Paul's letter has dried.

These issues begin to come alive to us in ways you might not expect. In having spent this summer with the apostle Paul, I think I've gained a few insights that might help us make sense of his words in a new and constructive way.

All too often when we read Scripture we hear what we want to have said to us and we come away unchallenged, unstimulated, and unmoved. We meet just what we expect, which is not realistic or helpful, because... after all, we're reading a letter 2,000 years old, from a different place, translated from a different language, and a dramatically different social

situation. In ancient Rome, slavery was the norm, not an exception; gladiatorial battles regularly took place (the Coliseum was not yet built, but ‘contests’ were held in the Roman Forum), and the economy was mostly agrarian, just beginning to become monetized. Importantly for us, religion was vastly different, too.

For Romans and Jews alike, animal sacrifice was standard practice of the day. That is, sacrifice wasn’t just ‘giving up something for Lent’, or substituting one thing for another, but real, bloody, animal sacrifice. For Jews, no institution was more important than the Temple in Jerusalem, and for Romans no place more significant than their local temple of their designated god. For all, no practice was more important than animal sacrifice, whether it be a dove, a lamb or a steer. Romans also offered up pigs (which were taboo for Jews, of course.)



The ceremony and practice of sacrifice symbolized atonement, ‘oneness’, forgiveness, union with the divine; and a whole host of religious features, besides giving purpose for a priesthood and an institutionalized ‘state religion’.

This is what Saul (Paul) knew in his early life; this was the life of the Jewish community. What changed when Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus was not just Saul’s name or belief system, but his way of life... or better said, his ‘sacrificial’ way of life. So as this passage begins, when Paul pleads to fellow believers in Christ to present themselves as a ‘living sacrifice’, he’s really saying something new and very big. He’s flipping the system on its head and saying that it is not the offering that you bring, but rather the offering that you are - that counts for God. “Do not be conformed to this world” means, ‘you do not have to bring a sacrifice; instead, your life itself can and should be lived in a new, transforming, different and liberating way!’

Unlocking this first key of understanding opens up a new way of living from now on. (We might not see this as all so radical, but for Jews and Gentiles in ancient Rome, these words came to them like lightning bolts from the sky.)

Then Paul goes on to explain how it is that each and all of us are given gifts to offer, all of which are worthy, important, necessary and integral to the greater whole of the body of Christ, of which we are a part.

The Church in Rome apparently needed a lesson in unity. Paul needed a positive metaphor to express the kind of togetherness that is Christ's hope for the Church. Perhaps you wonder what made Paul think of his metaphor of a body for the church? Maybe it was his awareness of how fragile the body was in his first-century context. Maybe his mind wandered to visits he had paid in the past to shrines to Asclepius in various cities he had visited. Asclepius was the god of healing (and son of Apollo, with sisters Hygeia [Hygiene], and Panacea.) If you had an infirmity, you presented Asclepius with an offering of honey cakes, then slept overnight in the temple. The god would appear to you in a dream and heal the affected body part. Then you would have a terra cotta model of it made and place it on display at the shrine next to



the bathing pool. The visitor, as they sat by the pool at Asclepius' shrine, could view the samples on the wall, replicas of all kinds of body parts supposedly healed by the god (heads,



hands, feet, arms, legs, breasts, genitals, eyes and ears). And in his mind's eye, perhaps the thought appeared to Paul: "What life do any of the members have unless they are joined together in a living body?"

Whatever made Paul think of it, the body is the perfect metaphor for unity in the church. It's better than a family or a team. You can take a break from being a member of a team. You can go on vacation without your family. But you can't take a break from the parts of your body.

The eye can't say to the hand, I don't need you. The head can't say to the foot, I don't need you. When Paul says, "You are the body of Christ," he doesn't mean that the church literally is Christ's body in every way, so as to be without error or flaw. He means that the church is a body that belongs to Christ. The Church is a body that gives Christ a face to the world, his voice, his hands and his feet. This is why, when Paul was persecuting Christians before his conversion,

Jesus said to him on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" We are all imperfect members, but we all belong to Christ's body on earth and in heaven.

Finally, we are together as a body, but also as one in behavior as well. And Paul asks his fellow believers to put their bodies on the line, as well in their behavior, this time as 'a living sacrifice' - and not a sacrifice to death. His instructions are clear.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil..., but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good."



Paul's instructions sound counterintuitive at best and dangerously naïve at worst. His words aren't particularly original, or 'uniquely Christian' at all. Many of these exact words and this distinctive sentiment appear in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah and the Psalms. Paul was still being a faithful Pharisee, according to his training.

Yet these words are also strangely liberating, in the way of Jesus' life. The best illustrations of what these words look like come in the practices of Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, taking upon oneself the violence another inflicts as a sign of willful obedience to a greater and higher power.

Now in case you are wondering where the strength comes from to live in this way, Paul has incredible confidence in the power of love. What else would propel him to speak so compellingly in favor of blessing those who persecute? Author and pastor Barbara Brown Taylor comments in this way on evil inflicted upon us, "The only way to conquer evil is to absorb it. Take it into yourself and disarm it. Neutralize its acids. Serve as a charcoal filter for its smog. Suck it up, put a straitjacket on it and turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure."



So it is that the Apostle both instructed and lived his life. Dramatically welcomed into the body of Christ by Jesus' call to him, he prayerfully

submitted and was filled by the Holy Spirit. Transformed by Christ's call, he lived out and shared what he knew.

May we also be so blessed to follow Christ in the way we hear Jesus' call to us and live in step with God's purposes.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers...

Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good.

Amen.