

Romans 12: 1-8 “A Living Sacrifice” Rev. Janet Chapman 8/27/23

A story is told of a woman who was always bragging to her friends that she had the best marriage in the world. “My husband and I have a very happy marriage. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for me and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him – and that’s the way we go thru life – doing nothing for each other.” I think the apostle Paul would say she missed the point of his encouragement to the church at Rome. The church at Rome is suffering from a lack of unity and inability to put their faith into practice. In the context of imperial Rome where the empire is powerful, pervasive and cunning, Paul challenges the people to do something for each other. The truth is we share a great deal with the church in Rome of 2000 years ago. The empire we live in is actually far more powerful in claiming devotion and demanding sacrifice than what was seen in the second century. Consider for a moment that we not only live in a “market economy,” we live in a “market society,” where the claim made by some scholars is valid that “outside of the market, there is no salvation.” Our culture creates idols and our world claims imperial status bowing down and serving the market mentality faster than any time in history, partially because we now live in an era of instantaneous communication. Social media like TikTok, X formerly Facebook, and Instagram have provided the opportunity to bridge divisions and build connections across all walks of life which is a good thing. But they have also heightened the market mentality where individual greed and pride squash sacrificial generosity and hospitality. In such a world, being sacrificial is seen as weak, useless, and defeating.

In the face of idols that demand daily devotion, Paul speaks to you and I.

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Now most of us in the 21st

century have no idea what it is to present a dead sacrifice to God. We are certainly grateful that the days of sacrificing animals to God as in biblical times to receive forgiveness or express gratitude have long passed. Therefore, a redefinition of the term “sacrifice” is needed. In popular usage, the word “sacrifice” usually means something negative. Parents of Olympic athletes make economic sacrifices for the training of their children. Employees are asked to sacrifice raises or benefits when a company falls on hard times. A heroic soldier sacrifices his life to save his comrades. This last example is one of the few involving a physical body, and points to death or severe injury. But not always – sometimes in the military, we find a definition for “sacrifice” which actually just might reflect Paul’s argument in this text.

A university professor tells of being invited to speak at a military base around Christmas and meeting an unforgettable soldier named Ralph. Ralph picked him up at the airport and they headed toward the baggage claim. As they walked down the concourse, Ralph kept disappearing. Once to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen apart; once to lift two toddlers up to where they could see Santa Claus, again to give directions to someone who was lost. Each time he came back with a smile on his face. The professor asked, “Where did you learn that?” “What?” Ralph said. “Where did you learn to live like that?” “Oh,” Ralph said, “during the war, I guess.” He then told the professor about his tour of duty in Vietnam, how it was his job to clear minefields, how he watched his friends blow up before his very eyes, one after another. “I learned to live between steps,” he said. “I never knew whether the next one would be my last, so I learned to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again.

Every step I took was a whole new world, and I guess I've been that way ever since." Paul invites believers to present our bodies as living sacrifices. This isn't as much about the "take up your cross" expectation that we will need to die physically in the course of our faith practice, though it doesn't rule it out. It is more about discerning and living according to the will of God, more about how well we live than how long we live. This approach asks what implications there might be for our very bodies as we live out our discipleship to God. Could it mean we need to actually do things that will put us outside the norms of behavior for our society? Are our actions and our words reflective of God's will for not just ourselves but for creation?

Paul spells out some of these activities as the text continues. We are called, each according to our gifts, to use our bodies as prophets, ministers, teachers, exhorters, givers, leaders, and in acts of cheerful compassion. Verse 3 encourages us not to think too highly of ourselves in any of our actions or words - this directly counters so much of what we see played out in our nation. Paul seems to be saying, "It is not about you, and that includes your body." It should be noted that doesn't mean someone else can control our bodies, or that following God means letting another human being abuse our bodies. This has been a lie the church has taught women and children for far too long, serving as a misapplication of Paul's words. The body is a favorite metaphor of Paul's to describe the church community and he would be greatly distressed to see it misused. As in Paul's letter called First Corinthians, he wants to stress that the body is a fragile thing, therefore, we should be grateful for it and take better care of it. We should recognize all the different bodily parts need one another and ought to work together to survive and thrive in an often-hostile

environment. Therefore, to those who are the opposite of the conceited ones, and assume they are not “good enough” to contribute, Paul offers encouragement. He points out that every one of us has a role to play, every member is encouraged to stop denying their gifts and step out in faith, taking a risk to serve, and sacrificing on behalf of the whole body. Rochelle Stackhouse notes that for Paul, “sacrifice” is a positive not a negative term, an empowering and uplifting term of consecration to the will and the work of God. This dedication to the will of God results in our using our gifts through the body to bring about God’s dream for all people.

Speaking of dreams, some of you know that Monday marks the 60th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have A Dream” speech near the Washington Monument. MLK’s nonviolent movement sought to transform the soul and laws of the nation through being a living sacrifice in the public eye, revealing what an entire community can do when it makes itself a living sacrifice. His words are filled with wisdom: “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of people willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.” The time is always ripe to do right. The time is always right to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God.

When Victoria was queen of the British Empire, she once visited the Punjab in India. Her empire stretched around the globe. Britain ruled the seas. When Queen Victoria spoke, the world listened. That afternoon, in the Punjab, she was told that a young prince of a minor province would like to make a presentation to her. She said, “Show him in.” The young prince, really just a

small child, knelt before the queen. Then he stood, reached into his pocket, and held out a small cloth bag. The queen's attendant opened the bag. A large, brilliant, polished diamond fell into his hand. The audience gasped, each one whispering to the other about the gigantic size. Queen Victoria thanked the little prince and promised that his generous gift would become a permanent part of the royal crown jewels in Lond. Many years later, the young prince returned to England and asked to see the aging Queen Victoria. She was reminded of his earlier gift and granted him an audience. The young man asked if he might see the diamond he had given so long ago. It was brought from the vault and handed to him. "Your Highness," he said, "Years ago when I was a small child, I gave this diamond to you. At that time, I had no idea how much this stone was worth. Now I am a man. Now I know how much this stone is really worth. May I give it to you again, with all my heart?" As each of us grows older, we come to better understand what incredible worth and value our individual bodies encompass, and what a gift the body of Christ is, with its many members each entrusted with abilities to contribute. With such an understanding, Paul says, "Will you give yourself to God as a living sacrifice again?"

A boy and his father were driving down a country road on a beautiful fall afternoon, when a bumblebee flew in the car window. The little boy, who was allergic to bee stings, was petrified. The father quickly reached out, grabbed the bee, squeezed it gently in his hand, and then released it. The boy grew frantic as it buzzed by him. Once again, the father reached out his hand, but this time he pointed to his palm. There stuck in his skin was the stinger of the bee. "Do you see this?" he asked. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I've taken the sting

for you.” Knowing what God has done for you, will you give yourself as a living sacrifice with your whole heart again and again?