

Romans 12: 1-8 "Bodies as A Living Sacrifice" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/23/20

Some of you may remember The Art Linkletter Show back in the 50's & 60's. It was the first predecessor to Bill Cosby's and now Tiffany Haddish's "Kids Say the Darndest Things." Linkletter was sitting with a group of children when one little boy volunteered the sad news that his dog just died. Linkletter said, "I'm sorry but it's ok – I'm sure your dog is in heaven," to which the boy scrunched up his face and replied, "What would God want with a dead dog?" it was not what Linkletter was getting at but taken at face value, it is actually a very good question. Why indeed? It is a question which would not have been raised in biblical times because the offering of dead animals to God was expected.

Being an animal lover, I hated references to animals being sacrificed and offered to God. Even more jarring, if taken in literal form, is Paul's words, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." To our 21st century ears, the concept of presenting dead sacrifices to God as a way to atone for sin or as a gift of thanksgiving comes across as gross, even downright evil. So is it any better if Paul qualifies the request by saying "present your bodies as a *living* sacrifice?" Just what is he getting at here? Marcus Borg & Dominic Crossan have noted that "to present one's body, one's self, as a "living sacrifice" points to an image of dying – of giving up one's life as in a sacrifice, offering one's life as a gift to God." Yet, sacrifice in popular usage often indicates something negative. Parents of Olympic athletes make economic sacrifices for the training of their kids. Employees are asked to sacrifice raises or benefits when a company falls on hard times. A heroic firefighter sacrifices his life to save his comrades. This last example is the most relevant for our text today because it involves a physical body, and in that case sacrifice means death or severe injury. Paul is intentional as he

brings up the body image both here and in First Corinthians. By doing so, he is stepping away from the traditional understanding of sacrifices to God as some substitute or payment for human sin. Paul often speaks of Jesus dying “for others” and as a “sacrifice,” but we misunderstand Paul’s words if we hear him saying this was done in order to pay for our sins. In Paul’s language, dying “for” someone doesn’t necessarily imply substitution. Consider in ordinary language, when people talk about somebody dying for somebody else, they seldom if ever mean “in that person’s place.” Rather, they man for that person’s sake or benefit. A parent risks her life and dies in order to save her child from a burning house. A soldier leaps on a grenade in order to save the lives of her buddies. One might say that the mother and the soldier died instead of the child and the buddies, but one wouldn’t mean as a “substitute.” Rather they gave up their lives for the sake of others. They died that others might live. For Paul, “sacrifice” is a positive term of dedication to the will and work of God. Rather than as a substitute, sacrifice is seen as a form of consecration that enables the body to use its gifts in unity to achieve God’s will.

Then Paul branches off into the metaphor of the body as he ties bodily, living sacrifice to living into the will of God. Doing this forces us to go beyond the emotional or esoteric surrender to God’s will and pushes forward to consider how our very bodies can reflect our following of God’s ways. This may mean we need to actually **do** things that will put us outside the norms of behavior for our society, not being conformed to our culture, but being reflective of God’s norms of behavior. We aren’t sure what made Paul focus on the body metaphor so much, maybe it was his awareness of how fragile the body was in his society. We are being awakened to that reality now as well. Maybe Paul woke up one day grateful that he had made

it this far in his life, thinking to himself, “The body is a fragile thing. I am lucky that I was not one of the 25% of infants who died before age one, or the 50% of children who died before age 10. I am lucky I haven’t lived in a city my whole life, but traveled in the open air because cities are a breeding ground for disease. I am fortunate I haven’t come under the care of some quack doctor whose home remedies do more harm than good. The body is a fragile thing. I should be grateful for it. I should take better care of it. I should realize all its parts need one another and need to work together to survive and thrive in an often hostile environment.” Maybe some of this was in Paul’s mind as he penned his poetic and metaphorical words.

As Paul travelled, he would have gone past many shrines to Asklepio in various cities. Asklepio was the god of healing. If you had an infirmity, you presented him 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 the body part made and place it on display at the shrine next to the healing pool. The visitor then could contemplate the wall replicas of all kinds of body parts supposedly healed by this god. And in Paul’s mind, maybe he pondered “What life do any of the members of the body have unless they are joined together in a living body?” Whatever made him think of it, the body is the perfect metaphor for the church and its individual members then and now. Each part has value, each has different functions, and each is intimately connected to the other just like the hand, neck and torso of a human body are. Any gift we have been given is meant to be used for the good of the community and all gifts are equally important!

It is too easy to forget this God-given connection we have in these COVID days, to set aside our common need for one another. So much of what is happening around us leads us to

divide rather than unite, to separate rather than to connect, to distance our minds and spirits rather than just our physicality. It is much harder now to keep in touch and we must dedicate ourselves to doing just that, to reaching out to one another and responding in kind so that this bond which makes up the body of Christ here at First Christian Church doesn't dissolve. For many, the way we are worshipping each week and the distance we must keep from each other isn't the way you are used to doing things. It is the same for me – I stand with most pastors in saying this is the hardest thing I have ever had to do in ministry. The church body as a whole is hurting, it needs you to ensure it stays healthy and relevant; it requires your interaction and empathy for and with others. Some of you do this with a simple and warm "hello church" on Facebook Live each Sunday; some of you give nourishment by a card, call or text; some of you faithfully keep the church and its members in prayer each week; some of you donate financial support and sometimes a little extra to cover those who are suffering; some of you share strength through a simple reminder that we are not alone; and sometimes words aren't even necessary as the sacrificial living of one's life speaks volumes.

A story is told about the great Christian servant Toyhitiko Kagawa who was a Japanese Christian who had risked his life time and time again during World War II in order to save American airmen who had been shot down over Japan. He hid them and did his best to keep them alive by sharing his limited supply of food. It wasn't that he sided with the American cause; it was just that his Christianity compelled him to love even those who were bombing and killing his friends and relatives. In giving himself as a bodily, living sacrifice to God, he was eventually caught and tortured. While in prison, he contracted TB. Upon being invited to preach at Princeton Seminary many years later, he spoke softly and his body was very frail. In

the audience were two young seminarians who were not very impressed by his testimony. At the end of the message, one turned to the other and said, "He really didn't say very much, did he?" At this point, an elderly woman sitting in front of them turned and said, "Young man! When a man is hanging on a cross, he doesn't have to say anything at all!"

"I appeal to you therefore, dearest 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." Amen