

Todd Allen  
2017  
Interim Pastor  
Ordinary Time

August 27,  
Sunday,

A Timely—and Timeless—Appeal”

Text: Romans 12:1-9

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Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

<sup>3</sup>For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup>For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup>We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your<sup>[a]</sup> faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,<sup>[b]</sup> do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. <sup>9</sup>Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts will alike be acceptable in Your sight, for You remain our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Therefore....”

We have reached a pivot point, with these words. Up to this point in Paul’s letter to the churches in Rome, he has presented an overview of the saving activity of God in the life of God’s people, in this case both Jews and Gentiles. And it has been a masterful exposition—indeed, if you, my friends, want to see a master at work, look

no further than this letter of Paul, the great apologist for our faith. It is truly the work of a brilliant mind—a formidable writer; in fact, do yourself a favor later today: Pull up a chair, pour a mug of your favorite drink—say a prayer—and dive into this letter. You’ll be glad you did!

What, then, does Paul say—in brief?

Well, to cut to the chase, while all humankind has sinned and deserves the condemnation of God, Paul re-affirms that God has acted, and has acted in such a way, moreover, that all people can now be saved through Christ, even if—even if!—it appears that the Jews—as a people—have rejected Christ as this same Messiah. Israel still has a special place in the heart of God, Paul argues, even if that place may appear jeopardized by the way things currently stand. Here—in a nutshell—is his argument, and it is an argument he directs to congregations in Rome who—by this time in history—boast both Jews and former Gentiles in their membership. This letter, therefore, is a treatise about the reason why there is unity within the Church of Jesus Christ—and a unity that must be re-affirmed especially in times of disagreement and division: This unity, quite simply, rests in Christ’s death for all.

But Paul is not finished yet. It is not enough, for instance, to lay out the reasons for why there should be unity within these same churches, Paul now feels he must speak to how this unity can be achieved—and maintained. And that’s where Chapter 12 takes off, with the words, “therefore”...

“Therefore...”

“Because”—in other words...

“Because”—and more to the point—“Because Christ has died for all”—do this...

Well, what’s the “do this”:

“I urge you, brothers and sisters....to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

A most interesting exhortation—and I say this because you and I live in a world where many of us look at our bodies and, well, find them—shall I say--somewhat imperfect.

What does it mean to offer to God as a living sacrifice my, ummm, somewhat pudgy body? It’s a body that has been through events have left it somewhat wrinkled and torn, if you like, and, quite honestly, there are days when my body is filled with aches and pains—yes, already! In fact—and perhaps like you—I sometimes discover that my body is just not able to do what it used to do—and it certainly is not able to do what those with other bodies who are in better shape are able to do. Oh, to be 18 again!

And so, what is Paul getting at with this exhortation—and with an exhortation that calls to mind the worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, long ago, that involved the sacrifice of animals—the offering of animals—moreover—who were perfect, without blemish? Do I need to go on a diet to please God? Do all of us need to enroll in a gymnasium to be an acceptable sacrifice? Must our limbs all be attached? Must we have everything in perfect working order to be "holy"?

By no means!

Friends, Paul is not claiming that some form of bodily perfection that what matters to God—by no means (and as he is apt to say!). No—this response to God's mercy that he speaks to means something much more than meeting some standard of good looks, health, and vitality. No, something less physical - something much more spiritual - is on his mind, and he says as much when he says that the offering our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, friends, is our "spiritual act of worship", quote, unquote....

So let's think for a minute about our spiritual lives as if they are bodies...

What kind of shape are they in?

Are they pure and unblemished?

Are they up to tasks that they are meant to perform--or are they—so to speak--limping along—like I am a bit more these days - full of aches and pains?

Are they filled with doubts—with confusion?

With worry?

Even hatred?

Yes, are our spiritual bodies filled with these things even if—even if!—they also contain faith—truth—trust--and love?

You know, I suspect the latter is true of many of us. I think that when we look at ourselves we don't see ourselves as perfect in every way, or even in many ways. We may regard ourselves as having a good heart, as being loving and kind -but then—as we grow in faith—we can also become aware of the little irregularities that come along: Sometimes it seems - that even with the healthiest of spirits--there is a little shortness of breath, maybe—as the Alaskans we are—we may love the mountains here, but we can also discover a little reluctance to go out and to climb the highest mountains—maybe—and to be truly serious—we may wonder if we can walk around the block....

I could push more at this metaphor, but I think we can all agree that not all the parts of our spiritual body are fully presentable--at least not now--not yet--and--to be honest--perhaps we must also admit that there is no way that they will be--that you and I, more to point, will never be able to offer to God what other people are able to offer--people who--to return to our metaphor--are in much better shape than we are, not just physically, but also spiritually....

**My friends - the message today is that God doesn't expect perfection--but God expects participation. God wants each of us--each and every last one of us--to play our part...**

For many years, as you may know, I have enjoyed the insights of Richard Fairchild, a minister in the Uniting Church in Canada. Dick always has something wonderful to share about how faith and life intersect, and here's an example--as I quote him:

*"I remember vividly the first time I had accidentally washed a twenty dollar bill. I found its remains balled up inside my freshly washed pants pockets. It was balled up and in a terrible shape--in fact, in trying to unwrap it, I tore it into about four or five pieces.*

*Twenty dollars then was a lot more money than it is now (!) and I was about in tears wondering if I could still use it - if it was worth anything. Some bits of the bill were simply missing - turned to mush--but--as the paper dried out--I got out some tape, smoothed out the pieces as best as I could and put the whole thing back together again and took it off to my bank. There, a clerk examined, shook her head with a smile, put it in her cash drawer--and handed back to me a nice fresh bill.*

*What a relief it was. And what a lesson...."*

I love that story. It's a reminder that just as the Government of Canada--in Richard's case--will take a crumpled and torn bill and value it as highly as one in perfect condition, so God takes us - you and me--when we offer ourselves to Him in what-ever condition we are in--and, friends, here's wonderful news: God values us as the greatest saint in our midst. It's true--amazing, isn't it? Yes, here is the Good News of this passage today: God values each of us--and God even values us as highly as he values his own Son!

Here's what the Gospel is about--and here's what Paul states so beautifully in this letter to the churches in Rome: Through Christ's offering of his own body to God upon the cross for us, through his offering up his whole life in obedience and in love--God was pleased, and God then honored Jesus!

Yes, God honored Jesus—and this means God has honored Jesus' words to his disciples—and what did Jesus say? He said that all who were His would be the Father's—and that all that belonged to the Father, belonged also to The Son. And so, when we join ourselves to Christ—and when we offer ourselves to him completely - in body, in heart, in soul and in mind—it means that God will accept us! It means that God will take what is now imperfect—and make it perfect. It means that God will take what is now perishable--and make it imperishable—it means that what is now mortal, will—one day—be made immortal...

***Here is what “spiritual worship” is all about: It is the offering of all we are, friends—of everything good—and bad, of everything perfect—and imperfect - to God so that God can take it, and do with it what God wills....***

And let me add that the appeal Paul makes here—in this letter—is both timeless, and, ever so timely, for it is a word to us about the kind of people we should be—one to another—within this congregation. It's a word that calls us to be both humble—and also intentional. It's a word that says we should not think too highly of ourselves—and also too lowly of ourselves, either. That we should recognize—and respect--the gifts God has given to those around us, while we also take responsibility for using the gifts God has given us to build up this church family: *All of us have a part to play, and, please do not think for a moment that it is acceptable for you to step back so that someone else may step forward, here. Step up—together! THIS is what God is calling you do to—and this is what God needs you to do...*

Yes—God NEEDS this--and perhaps now more than ever. Look at our national life, at this moment. Consider, for instance, how there are voices being raised in favor of the superiority of one race over another—friends, we cannot deny that this ideology is alive and well in our nation today—we can't. What shall we say in response to this? Of course, there is the reply that all men are created equal—as a cherished political document says—but—I ask you—what is the basis for this claim, save, this letter from the Apostle Paul of long ago? The freedoms we are given--and the respect we must extend to all people—do not come out of a vacuum: They rest with God's Word, and—more to the point—they rest upon God's work through Christ Jesus, for it is He who has taken our bruised and broken world and nailed it to a Cross—and it is He who—through His resurrection—has opened the way for us to rise above hate—bigotry—and fear if---if!—we will let Him have His way, with us!

Just last week, I turned—as I do every Thursday—to the thoughts of David Brooks, a columnist for the New York Times, and, friends, I will hold no punches—as I quote his words now:

***“Donald Trump is not the answer to this nation's problems, so the great questions of the moment are: If not Trump, what? What does the reaction to Trump look like?”***

I do not seek, today, to be political, but I do seek to be theological: The answer, friends, is—as it has always been—Jesus Christ. It is His Cross—and it is His Resurrection. It is His dying—and it is His rising again—that allows us to put to death what is evil—and to lay hold of what gives life. It is in Christ—and Christ alone—that we are given a unity—and a value—that no earthly power can ever erase, even though it may try hard to do so through appealing to our fears and our hurts-- yes, let me be ever so theological today: *Acting like Christ—to one another within these walls—and acting like Christ to all outside of these walls—is not a political statement—it’s not something we do because we are Republicans, or because we are Democrats—or even Independents: It is an act of worship—it is the offering of ourselves—imperfect as we are—to the One who can—and will—take us and make us into the offering he wishes us to be, all to advance His kingdom on earth!*

What is the answer to our nation’s problems? And what does a reaction to those elements we may find detestable in our political leaders and in our political look like?

It is never one person: It is US—you and me—being the Church of Jesus Christ—within these walls—and also outside of them.

It is EACH of us playing the part God has given to us—and not shirking our part.

It is ALL of US being One Body—faithful to One Lord, One Faith, and One Baptism.

Let this be so—and let us—in gratitude to God, re-commit to THIS path for our lives today , by saying “Amen”—by saying “Let it be so!”—“Let it be so!”

Amen!  
Amen!!

Donald Trump is not the answer to this nation's problems, so the great questions of the moment are: If not Trump, what? What does the reaction to Trump look like?

For some people, the warriors of the populist right must be replaced by warriors of the populist left. For these people, Trump has revealed an ugly authoritarian tendency in American society that has to be fought with relentless fervor and moral clarity.

For others, it's Trump's warrior mentality itself that must be replaced. Warriors on one side inevitably call forth warriors on the other, and that just means more culture war, more barbarism, more dishonesty and more dysfunction.

The people in this camp we will call moderates. Like most of you, I dislike the word moderate. It is too milquetoast. But I've been inspired by Aurelian Craiutu's great book "[Faces of Moderation](#)" to stick with this word, at least until a better one comes along.

Moderates do not see politics as warfare. Instead, national politics is a voyage with a fractious fleet. Wisdom is finding the right formation of ships for each specific circumstance so the whole assembly can ride the waves forward for another day. Moderation is not an ideology; it's a way of coping with the complexity of the world. Moderates tend to embrace certain ideas:

*The truth is plural.* There is no one and correct answer to the big political questions. Instead, politics is usually a tension between two or more views, each of which possesses a piece of the truth. Sometimes immigration restrictions should be loosened to bring in new people and new dynamism; sometimes they should be tightened to ensure national cohesion. Leadership is about determining which viewpoint is more needed at that moment. Politics is a dynamic unfolding, not a debate that can ever be settled once and for all.

*Politics is a limited activity.* Zealots look to the political realm for salvation and self-fulfillment. They turn politics into a secular religion and ultimately an apocalyptic war of religion because they try to impose one correct answer on all of life. Moderates believe that, at most, government can create a platform upon which the beautiful things in life can flourish. But it cannot itself provide those beautiful things. Government can create economic and physical security and a just order, but meaning, joy and the good life flow from loving relationships, thick communities and wise friends. The moderate is prudent and temperate about political life because he is so passionate about emotional, spiritual and intellectual life.

*Creativity is syncretistic.* Voyagers don't just pull their ideas from the center of the ideological spectrum. They believe creativity happens when you merge galaxies of belief that seem at first blush incompatible. They might combine left-wing ideas about labor unions with right-wing ideas about local community to come up with a new conception of labor law. Because they are syncretistic, they are careful to spend time in opposing camps, always opening lines of communication. The wise moderate can hold two or more opposing ideas together in her mind at the same time.

*In politics, the lows are lower than the highs are high.* The harm government does when it screws up — wars, depressions — is larger than the benefits government produces when it does well. Therefore the moderate operates from a politics of skepticism, not a politics of faith. He understands that most of the choices are among bad options (North Korea), so he prefers steady incremental reform to sudden revolutionary change.

*Truth before justice.* All political movements must face inconvenient facts — thoughts and data that seem to aid their foes. If you try to suppress those facts, by banning a speaker or firing an employee, then you are putting the goals of your cause, no matter how noble, above the search for truth. This is the path to fanaticism, and it always backfires in the end.

*Beware the danger of a single identity.* Before they brutalize politics, warriors brutalize themselves. Instead of living out several identities — Latina/lesbian/gun-owning/Christian — that pull in different

directions, they turn themselves into monads. They prioritize one identity, one narrative and one comforting distortion.

*Partisanship is necessary but blinding.* Partisan debate sharpens opinion, but partisans tend to justify their own sins by pointing to the other side's sins. Moderates are problematic members of their party. They tend to be hard on their peers and sympathetic to their foes.

*Humility is the fundamental virtue.* Humility is a radical self-awareness from a position outside yourself — a form of radical honesty. The more the moderate grapples with reality the more she understands how much is beyond our understanding.

Moderation requires courage. Moderates don't operate from the safety of their ideologically pure galleons. They are unafraid to face the cross currents, detached from clan, acknowledging how little they know.

If you have elected a man who is not awed by the complexity of the world, but who filters the world to suit his own narcissism, then woe to you, because such a man is the opposite of the moderate voyager type. He will reap a whirlwind.