

August 27, 2023

The Sixteenth Sunday of Pentecost

Romans 12:1-8

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Someone has said reading the letters of Paul is like opening other people's mail. You may have had that feeling as Jean read the Epistle lesson for today. After all, the letter was written in the year 50—not 1950 but 50—by an obscure Jewish rabbi to an emerging religious sect gathered in a few safe-houses in Rome. It is not addressed to me. It is like a message in a bottle from another shore. If you've ever read someone else's mail (and I'm assuming you haven't, unless you're the parents of teenagers), you know that something doesn't connect. It's possible to understand every word in the letter and not have the faintest idea of what is going on.

My mother recently found an old letter written by my great-grandfather to his betrothed, my great-grandmother. It contained this sentence: "Surely, Miss Laura, you are not insensible of the constraints which both nature and fortune have laid upon me in the matter of our mutual necessity." Can anybody help me with that? What exactly did 19th-century Alabamians mean by "mutual necessity?" I'm not sure I want to know.

More than 25% of our New Testament is made up of letters whose return address is "P A U L." You could say these letters are important to us because they are in the Bible and the Bible is the "boss of us." But they communicate to us at an even deeper level than their official authority. They do for us what Paul was trying to do for his first readers. They show us how we fit in to something larger than ourselves. They offer us a vision of what it means to be a Christian.

The Letter to the Romans is every bit as important to the Christian church as the Declaration of Independence is to the United States. It says, 'We hold these truths to be revealed by God.' Paul had never been to Rome; he enjoyed no rapport with the Romans, and relied on no chemistry. He couldn't say to them, 'You know me, you can trust me.' He had to make a case.

In his biography of Harry Truman, the historian David McCullough implies that the little man from Independence, Missouri lacked a world vision. In its place, he often trusted his intuition and played his hunches—went by his gut—which in his talks with Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, proved disastrous.

For many people religion, too, is a matter of intuition or opinion. It is the heart's best hunch. In a recent survey of church goers, a majority said that the church is very important, but a majority of that majority said the church should never try to

influence my thought or behavior. That is to say: the church provides great atmospherics, but when you put out the candles and the last chorister has gone home, true religion follows the gravitational pull of ME. It's the heart's best hunch. As one of those surveyed said, "My religion is my own little voice."

When we do open ourselves to God, it is often to what is known as a "God-wink." A God-wink is a coincidence—a transitory clue that there may be someone out there trying to communicate with us. For example, just as you make a difficult decision, the sun breaks through the clouds as if to confirm it. Coincidence or message from God? A bluebird lands on your windowsill as you are pondering a marriage proposal. That must mean something (and what if it's a crow?) We've all had them: God-winks.

No wonder Paul is out of favor. Because he doesn't see religion as a benign confirmation of our own best instincts. He has a darker and more complicated view of God and human beings. He knows there is a hidden battle raging within each of us: for some it is a battle between despair and hope, for others between the desires of the self and the needs of other, for others between sexual impurity and faithfulness. In chapter 7 he writes of his own Christian life: the very thing I don't want to do is what I do; and what I want to do most, I fail at. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Some of you have come here on this August morning from the hospital, where you have a loved one. A few of you are homesick. Some of you are tormented by a deed that can't be undone. Some of you are grieving a terrible loss. Many of you—no, all of you—are uncertain about what comes next.

It's just here, where the battle is fiercest and life is most difficult, that you need more than a hunch. Why settle for a wink, when you can have a vision?

Paul sees a history bigger than most of us can imagine. In his vision all people live their daily lives in the shadow of a righteous God. All people have an inkling (or should I say a "winkling") of God's power and divinity. Despite being creatures of time, all people yearn for eternity.

In the chapter 5 of this letter, Paul lays out two parallel histories that will eventually become one history. The first is the history of human sinfulness epitomized by a figure named Adam, which in Hebrew means the man of dust. It leads to dust. The

second is the history of God's redemption, epitomized by a figure like Adam—who in I Corinthians Paul calls "the last Adam"—who lifts the whole race from the dust and sets us on a new journey. It leads to light.

What's so intriguing about Paul's vision is that no one is left out. Those, like the Jews, who were once in the story and appear to have fallen out of it, will be included in the end. "For," as Paul says in Romans 11:29, "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable." This is not one rabbi's opinion; it's a sweeping vision of God's personal history with everyone who has ever lived. That's what the letter is about, and that's why I can say it is written to you.

Paul is not trying to convert anybody. Rather, he is saying 'Since we all acknowledge God, and since some of us name this man Jesus as our New Adam, how shall we live?'

A preliminary answer comes from a soldier's confession during World War I. John Vannorsdall tells the story. Somewhere along the Western Front, with shells bursting, and handsome bodies mangled beyond hope, with grownups wailing like babies, a young man, who is no more than a boy himself, says to a comrade, "We weren't meant for this." We weren't meant for this. Post that sentence on all the battlefields and prisons of the world; post it above the urban garbage dumps where humans made in God's image scavenge for food, post it above homes filled with abuse. Nail it to this whole mass of damnation, which is our world: "we weren't meant for this."

True religion doesn't solve every personal problem. It tells us what we were meant for.

We were meant to live to a different standard. Paul calls it grace, and it only comes as a gift from God. Grace means living in the presence of someone who is always for you. Do you know anyone like that? For some it's a grandmother or an old friend or a big brother. Someone who wants the best for you, who doesn't want to see you hurt, who still loves you even when you do something incredibly stupid. Everyone should have such a person. Everyone does.

Why am I here? How should I live? How can I put together a life of integrity, honesty, and decency? Paul, whose genius is often expressed as paradox, supplies a vision. Earlier in the letter he says, if you want to be free, then count yourself a slave of

Jesus (huh?). And the central paradox of this morning's passage: become a living sacrifice. How is one a living sacrifice? Sacrifices are dead. Submitted, surrendered, placed on the altar to be slain. Only when you die to yourself, can you truly live.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated outside his hotel room in Memphis in 1968, Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, wrote poignantly of his life in her weekly newsletter. Drawing on the verse in the gospels that says, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, Day wrote: MLK Jr. Learned How to Die Daily. He died long before he was shot, Day suggested. And, he was alive in a way you and I can only begin to imagine. His obedience to the call of justice, fellowship, and love was a living sacrifice. But King didn't do it alone. In the dark nights of his despair, when he couldn't sleep, when he couldn't read, when his anxieties came after him, he would call his friend, the singer Mahalia Jackson, and he'd just ask her to sing for him over the phone line. She was the mercy of God that kept him going.

Come to Paul and expect a little spiritual hit, a little God-wink, and you are bound to be dissatisfied with his message, with his outlook. Come to him for a vision for how to be in the world, you are bound to be satisfied, even as you are dissatisfied by the difficulty of living out his answer.

Want to know joy, peace, serenity, power like you've never known? Lay down your life, says this ancient piece of postage. Become a living sacrifice. Worship not your education, your beautiful family, your lucrative career, the well curated garden of your life. Offer every cell of your being to God, that is your spiritual worship that will make you come alive. And whatever you do, don't do it alone. Live by the mercies of God flowing into you through others.

Paul has spent 11 chapters detailing, fine-tuning God's self-emptying, God's becoming a living sacrifice for us in Jesus. In Chapter 12 he says, "now what?". His "now what" feels perhaps a little underwhelming, especially for those pining for a glittery spiritual experience. He says, "Join the community of faith. Give yourself to others in that community, become a member of one another. Show up early and stay late. And share your life with them. Give yourself to something bigger than you. Become a living sacrifice that dies and comes alive daily." Imagine if you weren't created to perceive God winks; but rather to be a God-

soaked-presence for those around you.

Why take on such a task? There's no rational reason. The only reason is divine grace, that eternal outpouring of love bestowed on you.

And Paul lays it all out in the letter – with your name on it.

