

Lectionary 21A
Romans 12:1-21

Pastor Wayne Peterson
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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 has 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.

Mildred Rothi lived on the west end of town at the very end of 3rd Street. Her back yard was a cornfield and the train tracks ran just 50 yards north of the house. She and her husband Palmer were your typical small-town folks – simple life style, very friendly. Their youngest son, Charlie, caused somewhat of a stir in town back in the mid-60's when he bought a dune buggy, but other than that, their lives were pretty normal by small-town standards.

Mildred was my Sunday School teacher in the 4th grade. I only remember three things about that class – it was in a small classroom on the third floor of the education unit overlooking Mrs. Brabec’s house and flower garden; my best friend Terry and I weren’t always the best-behaved students; and Mrs. Rothi insisted that we memorize one particular Bible verse. In my memory it seems like we said it every Sunday, but it probably wasn’t that often. But it must be a lot, because it sticks in my mind above all else. I’m not sure why this verse was so special to her. Maybe it was suggested in the teacher’s guide. But now, about 47 years later, I can say, “Mrs. Rothi, I remember...”

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

Because of Mrs. Rothi, this section of Paul’s letter to the Romans has always been my favorite. I have learned over the years that the first verse of the chapter is critically important for properly understanding what Paul says here. To be more specific, it is the importance of just one word in that verse that is the foundation for the rest of the chapter. That one word is “therefore.” I suppose we should have a rule that we should never begin reading a section of any writing that begins with a “therefore,” because that term is a signal to us that what is about to be said is based upon or dependent on what was said earlier.

In this case, the “therefore” at the beginning of chapter 12 is a signal to us that what Paul is about to say is built on the foundation of the eleven chapters that precede it. And what has Paul said in those eleven chapters? The way we have summed it up previously is like this: Point 1 is that all human beings are sinful and are therefore not righteous - they are not faithful to the covenant God made with them and are therefore not in a proper relationship with God. Point 2 is, that in spite of Point 1, God *is* righteous – God is faithful to his promises and has demonstrated this righteousness by the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Point 3 is that we are made righteous not by what we do or don’t do, but solely by faith, by trust, in what God has done in Jesus.

Because God in Christ has done all the work to establish a positive relationship with us, “therefore” say Paul, here is what your life should look like. It is going to be a total response, involving our entire being. It will be as if we are making of our selves a living sacrifice. Considering all that God has done for us, the only reasonable, acceptable response is a presentation of our entire selves. And the result of this offering of our selves is transformation.

Throughout this letter, Paul has been contrasting two ways of living. He started out by contrasting being unrighteous and being righteous. Then he contrasted living under the law with living under grace. Next he contrasted living under bondage to sin with living under bondage to God. And then it was the difference between living according to the flesh with living according to the Spirit. All of these contrasts describe the same reality: the first option describes placing our trust in ourselves and the second option describes placing our trust in God. Now in chapter 12 Paul comes up with yet another set of terms to say the same thing – Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Or we might translate it this way, “Do not let yourselves be shaped by what everyone else does, but rather let yourselves be transformed by a whole new way of thinking, so you can discern what conforms to God’s will, namely what is good, and pleasing, and perfect.” (Achtmeier, *Romans*, p. 195) That is grace at work: to be able to hear these admonitions and then live our lives in accordance with them. The remainder of the letter consists of examples of such conformity to God’s will.

In chapter 12, Paul first speaks of conforming our lives to God's will in the Christian community and then widens the discussion and describes what living a life conformed to God's will looks like in the wider society. In rapid fire succession, Paul spits out about 25 imperative statements describing a transformed life that is conformed to God's will – think of yourself with sober judgment, let love be genuine, never flag in zeal, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer, bless those who persecute you, live in harmony with one another, and so on. A full sermon could no doubt be preached on each one of those statements, but we don't have that much time, so I'll comment on just one.

I like Paul's counsel for each of us to look at ourselves with "sober judgment." Many of us struggle with our self-image. It is easy to have an inflated self-image and think too highly of ourselves, and it is just as easy to have a deflated self-image and put ourselves down. Paul tells us that our self-image should be made with "sober judgment" – evaluating our gifts as honestly as possible. And we all do have spiritual gifts, says Paul – each one of us. He uses the image of the church being a body, with each of us being a part of that body with a function to fill. The difference among Christians is not that some have spiritual gifts and some do not. The difference consists in that not all have received the same spiritual gift.

Paul mentions a few such spiritual gifts – prophetic preaching, serving others, teaching, contributing money, doing acts of mercy. [I always find it interesting that he considers generous giving to be a spiritual gift!] This is not meant to be a complete list. In his letter to the Corinthian church he lists other gifts such as healing and administration. Paul wants us to understand that the gifts he names here are simply examples of the great variety of gifts God gives to enrich the life of the church.

While there is a diversity of gifts, it is important to recognize that there are no unimportant gifts of the spirit. There are no gifts of God the Christian community can afford to ignore. Many a Christian congregation has experienced division because of the temptation of spiritual pride, where some think themselves to be more important in the community than others. That's why Paul emphasizes the need for a sober, realistic self-estimate on our part, remembering that faith itself is a gift of God, a gift to be used for the good of others, for building up the community.

Now for the brief "wrap-up" summary of chapter 12: Paul's ethical admonitions in this chapter are not a way to earn God's favor but rather the way one responds appropriately, in trust and faithfulness, when one has received that favor. These admonitions are therefore not "law" in the sense of requirements we must fulfill if God is to accept us. Rather, they are the response to a grace taken seriously enough to have one's life transformed accordingly. They are the marks of discipleship.

Next Sunday we read Paul's words about what a transformed life looks like in relation to the state, and he says we are to be subject to the governing authorities and pay our taxes. Unfortunately, our new associate pastor and vicar don't begin until September, so I guess I'm stuck being the one who has to wrestle with that text.