

Body and Mind (Part 1)

For the next several weeks we'll be reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. We're jumping into it at about the three-quarters point, but as with most things I do there is a method to my madness. If you have a really good memory you might recall that not all that long ago in the early months of 2016, we worked our way through the first half of the letter—so we're really just picking up where we left off, sort of.

In those first eight chapters, Paul lays out more thoroughly than he does anywhere in his writings how it is that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." (Romans 1:16 NRSV) Beginning with how we humans have made such a mess of things, Paul teaches about God revealing his grace through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. He teaches how we are restored to peace with God through faith in him. He goes on to teach how in baptism we die to our old selves and are united with Christ to walk in newness of life, and then he teaches about the Holy Spirit's work to empower us to live this new life in Christ.

In the chapters we're passing over, Paul turns to the question that many think prompted him to write this letter in the first place—the question of where the people of Israel fit into all this. He teaches that God has fulfilled his promises to Israel through Jesus, and has opened the door for everyone, both Jew and Gentile, to share in the blessings God promised to Abraham and to all all the peoples of the earth.

Now in chapter 12, as Paul hits the top of the home stretch, he begins to speak in more day-to-day terms about what all this means. He has a lot to say in just these two verses, and I'm going to something that very unusual for me—I'm going to focus our attention just on one verse—verse 1—and come back to verse 2 next week.

In the gospel reading this morning Jesus answers the lawyer's question about the greatest commandment in the law by saying that the greatest commandment is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and that the second is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39 NRSV) The good news of the gospel is that through Christ we have been set free to love God and our neighbor as God has always intended us to. And in a real sense, here in the 12th chapter of Romans Paul expands on these two great commandments and puts them in practical terms.

He begins, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God ..." The starting point for our way of life as those who belong to Jesus is always here. It doesn't begin with us, it begins with God. As Paul says in chapter 5 of Romans, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 RSV) Our way of life is our outpouring of love and gratitude to God for the love and mercy he has shown us.

But this isn't just a New Testament thing. It begins way back at the beginning of God's relationship with Israel. Remember the preamble to the Ten Commandments. Before he gives his commandments he reminds his people of what he has already

done for the. The Lord said to Moses, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Exodus 20:2 RSV)

In the 116th Psalm the writer says, “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.” So both our obedience and our worship grow out of gratitude for God’s love for us.

At the end of the verse Paul says that to offer ourselves to God in this way is our “spiritual worship.” But the word he uses isn’t one that’s ordinarily translated “spiritual”—it’s a word that could be translated more literally as “logical.” So Paul says that offering ourselves to God—offering our bodies to him as living sacrifices is the logical thing for us to do in light of all that God has done for us.

And this brings us to the core of the verse—the thing that Paul actually appeals to us to do – “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” And in this case the word he uses is a very literal word for our physical bodies. So there’s something about this gratitude-filled offering of ourselves to God, something about our logical and spiritual worship, that has to do with our bodies.

In the time we have left this morning, I’d like to highlight three dimensions of what it might mean to offer our bodies as a spiritual sacrifice to God. The first implication of this is that our bodies matter to God. At the most basic level to be human is to have a body – even after death the Scriptures know nothing of us existing as some sort of disembodied spirits. That’s why we confess in the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body. Our bodies are part of God’s good creation, not just a temporary inconvenience. They are not to be seen as enemies or

impediments to our relationship with God, but the very place where that relationship is lived out.

We can go as far as to say that our bodies are what religion scholars like to call “sacred space.” Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 6,

[D]o you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NRSV)

Although we are maybe not as rigid about it as people were in former times, we have a sense of giving special respect to sacred spaces. We take special care in how we furnish and adorn them. We don't allow them to be used for just anything, but take care to use those spaces in ways that we hope will glorify and honor God. And we honor God when we treat our own physical bodies in the same way. Do you honor your body as the dwelling place of God?

If this is true for each of us then it is true—at least potentially—for everyone we meet. Do we honor other people's bodies as sacred spaces? Spaces that are not to be violated or profaned or subjected to violence or abuse? Offering ourselves fully to God includes glorifying God in our bodies.

Secondly, let's think for a moment about what our bodies have to do with the way we worship God when we come together as a community. This is something that our Presbyterian tradition—at least in its American forms—hasn't always been very good at recognizing. Other branches of God's family are much more conscious of this than we are, although they do it in vastly different ways. When we think about bodies in worship our minds might conjure up images of African-American or

Pentecostal worship, or other Christians who find it completely normal to glorify God by raising hands or dancing or clapping—or all three at the same time. But at the other end of the spectrum, the very carefully choreographed rituals in Roman Catholic and Orthodox worship are also a physical expression of worship and adoration.

Presbyterian worship has evolved into something that seems to be located mainly in our heads—where words take precedence over physical actions. We came to this on the one side for theological reasons—our ancestors rejected what they saw as the dead rituals of Roman worship. We came to it on the other side by being part of a cultural heritage that thinks that expressing oneself too enthusiastically in public is undignified.

So how can we offer our bodies more fully to God in worship? We could begin by recognizing the ways we already use them. Standing to sing or participate in a liturgy is not a mere formality; it is a way of honoring Christ who is present among us. The act of singing in itself a physical activity—ask any serious musician and they will tell you how physically demanding making music can be. The sacraments are God's gifts to the church that connect physical acts to spiritual realities. This summer we began offer the opportunity to be anointed with oil during communion—which is yet another way to make God's blessing tangible. Is God inviting us to explore how to more fully to make our bodies instruments of adoration and praise?

Third, and finally, since as humans we do everything “in the body” so to speak, offering our bodies to God as a living sacrifice means offering every aspect of our

lives to God. We live in a society that in some ways turns human bodies into idols—I'm thinking, for instance, of the way people idolize professional athletes and celebrities. But our society also shows a massive indifference to the importance of human bodies—beginning with the way in which so many people's work has been reduced to managing information. Or the opposite—how much labor intensive, back-breaking work is pushed out of our consciousness and onto the backs of immigrants or factory workers in far-off lands. Consider how many personal relationships are now “virtual” ones, or the chaos wrought in millions of lives in the wake of the sexual revolution. Or think of our society's struggles to get healthy living and health care right.

Our lives are lived “in the body.” What might it mean if out of gratitude for God's great mercies—we offered our bodies to God as a living in sacrifice—honoring our bodies as the dwelling place of Christ—offering our whole beings to God in worship—offering every dimension of our embodied lives to the Lord? Amen.

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