

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
August 30, 2020; 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 12:1-8

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship. ² 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.

³ 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 given you. ⁴ For just as each one of us has one body with many parts, and not all the parts have the same function, ⁵ so all of us, though we may be many, form one body in Christ, and each of us is part of one another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the preacher, in preaching; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to explain to the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

²³ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? What will they give in return for their very life?"

²⁷ "For the Promised One is to come with the angels in the glory of the Almighty, and then will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the coming of the reign of the Promised One."

SERMON

"Get in Line"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship. If that sounds familiar to you today, it may be because I've been talking about this passage from Romans for several weeks. We talked about how our actions shape our inner spirit and our inner spirit shapes our actions; and we talked about how we each give a name to who God is, and in turn who we are, by how we live and what we believe. That being true, that we each have a gloriously unique perspective on the nature of God's wondrous being, and that we need one another to see a more complete picture of the

Divine, it is ironic that we spend week after week offering MY perspective. Well, as they say in 12-Steps, "Take what you like, and leave the rest." And next time you see me, please share what name you give to G.O.D., the Great One Divine. Or better yet, if you're viewing live, or later on tape, add in a Comment, and just offer a God-name as we go.

Paul's description of Christian living in Romans is right in line with Jesus' lesson to his disciples to take up the cross to follow him. Paul says to present ourselves as a living sacrifice. That is, don't lay yourself down and die as a martyr (that could happen; but it's not a choice we make) In fact, Live ("I come that you may have life, and life abundant," right?). Live in Giving-Love. That's the Christian life, the curious paradoxical calling to give away ourselves and what we have, and in doing so receive. In giving away, we are given the fulfillment of Christ.

The gifts that we get out of it are offered in the text by Paul, not in a complete list, but a suggestion of just some of the gifts we're called to share. We all receive talents to give away, and you might notice that the Christian vocations Paul writes about are not all that sexy—prophet, teacher, preacher, leader, giver—(snore). Where's reality star, princess (although ask Meghan Markle or her mother-in-law Diana about that one), NFL quarterback or supermodel – nice work if you can get it, and yes, those do qualify as gifts that can be shared with the world, but not everyone is Called to be a billionaire. I'm ready though, Lord, if that's your will. Take me now!

Paul's list may remind you of how the church often presents sacrifice as suffering. Ohh, suffer, suffer, take up your cross—it is so hard to read this without thinking that it says we need to have miserable lives of unhappiness, or at least have no fun in life, in order to get into heaven, but no, the promise is that lives of giving lead to LIFE—not merely heaven—Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. What does that mean?

Well, an abundant life honestly doesn't mean anything about whether you are a billionaire or a hundred-aire. It doesn't mean Jesus wants you to be unhappy and suffer. God, our Joy-Eternal, "does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." (Lamentations 3:33)

Life is what afflicts and grieves us, this world we inhabit, and honestly, you may be just as afflicted or grieved as a prince as a pauper. The abundant life of Christ doesn't spare us from suffering, nor cause it. It gives us a depth of faith and reality to see us through the ups and downs that always come. And what we do with what happens to us brings joy through whatever circumstance brings. When I've worked at the emergency shelter, the homeless who seem to be bearing up the best are the ones who share with one another their meager lot, try to help clean up and leave the shelter at least as nice as they found it. I don't know Warren Buffett, but I'm willing to bet that Buffett, who gives away 16% percent of his vast income last year, and lives simply (as billiionaries go), is happier than any rich despot who clings to wealth and power like it will provide happiness and meaning. I could be wrong—I'm willing to start an

experiment. All of you give Gilead 16% of your income this year, and let me know how you feel. ☺ But I digress...

(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jenniferwang/2020/01/20/from-buffett-to-bloomberg-the-25-philanthropists-in-america-making-the-biggest-donations/#607f5ba54e8f>)

We are indeed called to the cross of sacrifice, because seeking only our own safety, care and need will never find a life of safety, care, and needs met. That's why true Christian service isn't a big sell here on earth. It requires a faith in something counter-intuitive. In giving, we receive. In dying, we live. And that's easy to forget, even for the most devoted disciple. Enter one of Jesus' favorites, Simon Peter:

"Simon Peter, come on down! And get behind me, Satan!" Uh-oh.... I can't tell you how much I appreciate the fact that this little character study of Peter immediately follows Jesus telling him that Jesus would build the church on Peter's great faith. Imagine if this were the only thing we knew about Peter, like it was captured on YouTube in 2019 and Social Media destroyed him as a disciple as unfit and faithless. But this is a snapshot of a man of great faith, and even wisdom, saying something ignorant, like we all do.

I also like the staging—it's rare in Scripture that we get a description about where folks were standing or moving about in conversation, but Peter took Jesus aside, we're told. Picture this, Peter's arm around the Savior, physically guiding him away from the others, and then Jesus turning to Peter, and saying, as we all know, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" Hear that within the movement of the piece. Jesus isn't saying, "Get out of my way, you evil one, you stumbling block that might trip me up." Peter has no power to impede the journey Jesus is on. Jesus is saying, "Listen, Peter. Get behind me. Fall in line with me and my sacrifice. What you're saying now follows the way of darkness." And Jesus immediately continues talking about what it means to follow him.

Remember last week's sermon. It's not enough merely to say "I follow Jesus;" it means we follow him out of comfort into the shadow of the cross.

"Get in line behind me," Peter is told. Why do we 21st century folks get in line? Usually we get in line to receive something, whether it's entry to a concert or a show, or get our food at a buffet dinner; others get their cars in line at the food pantry, like in the Depression when people stood in bread lines. Why a line? So we all get our fair turn—cutting line is as grievous a social sin when you're 60 as in first grade when you were six. But here we are, called by the Lord, queuing up not to receive bread, but our cross. And getting in line behind Jesus isn't about taking turns, but following the right path. Have you ever waited forever at the DMV in Line "A" for your turn to register your car, only to be told, "Oh, car registrations are Line 'Z.' This is only for boats. Next!" ☹ Peter is told, in this moment, he's gotten in the wrong line. He thinks they're handing out power and greatness, and Jesus is rattling on about crosses and sacrifice.

What is sacrifice? I know I shared with you my experience early in the COVID pandemic, when I heard a guy at the grocery store, eyeing an empty shelf where once was held cooking oil, say, "What—I can't make my wings? Now it's real!" Well, when

Jesus tells Peter the path leads to the cross, for Jesus, it's really real. No metaphor here. And if tradition is correct, almost all the disciples would face worldly execution in the name of their faith. As theologian and literal Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, "When Christ calls [us], He bids [us] come and die." (Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, The Cost of Discipleship, New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963, p.99) For some, as Bonhoeffer himself, the call may be really real. I pray that you and I have the choice how far we will take a metaphorical understanding of Christ's call.

Jesus was known for saying "follow me." He says it over forty times in the Gospels. And what does that mean? During Jesus' life and ministry, there was an obvious invitation to drop your nets, or whatever you were doing, and literally follow him down the lane, becoming an itinerant preacher of some kind, relying on the hospitality of others for sustenance, and hanging around in a rag-tag band listening to Jesus teach. So I wonder, when we hear Jesus' invitation today, if we don't sort of gloss over that instruction as a bygone relic. After all, most of us don't hit the road with a Bible and a backpack, hoping for the best, after we hear these words. So what does it mean, exactly? It means to become a devoted disciple of his. And that, we are taught in the New Testament, is to love God with our whole heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves; and in the Old Testament, to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. It's as simple as that. And as difficult as that, for it is a lifetime of work to achieve those purposes. It means giving up so much of our selves, and our self-servingly myopic perspective.

If we merely follow our own path along this earth, we will naturally choose just what betters our life, and those we love. Remember the phrase *Charity begins at home*, which is a phrase that means, *I don't believe in charity?* Loving our neighbor as ourselves is not how we would live if God didn't prod us in the right direction. We need a shepherd if we're going to follow the path to true enlightenment.

Jesus talked a lot about us as sheep. Of course, many of his original students knew sheep behavior a lot better than we city-folk do. But it's a pretty good analogy on the part of the Rabbi who refers to himself as the true shepherd and also the sacrificial lamb. Sheep are very social animals. So are we, a fact made painfully clear during COVID quarantine. And that very need for one another will cause us to herd together, even when not in our best interest. Like sheep:

When one sheep moves, the rest will follow, even if it does not seem to be a good idea. The flocking and following instinct of sheep is so strong that it caused the death of 400 sheep in 2006 in eastern Turkey. The sheep plunged to their death after one of the sheep tried to cross a 15-meter deep ravine, and the rest of the flock followed.

Even from birth, lambs learn to follow the older members of the flock. Ewes encourage their lambs to follow. The dominant members of the flock usually lead, followed by the submissive ones... (<http://www.sheep101.info/201/behavior.html>)

We need a good shepherd. Ephesians 4:14 warns us against being blown to and fro, here and there by the winds of false doctrine. Instead, follow the true teacher. Let go of the fear and the call of the world to look out just for you and yours.

Listen to this song that Mariah will sing in a moment.

All that I am, All I can be
All that I have, All that is me
Accept and use Lord
As you would choose Lord
Right now today
Take every passion every skill
Take all my dreams
And bend them to your will
My all I give Lord for you
I'll live Lord, Come what may

That was written by William Himes when he had terminal cancer. I don't know if he was thinking about life abundant as he wrote that hymn, facing the end. But I believe that the end of his life, which is something all of us have to face eventually, had more Life in it than if he had faced it alone.

("All That I Am," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRapoOsimKs>)

I'm a big fan of the late great John Denver. One of his early troubadour songs was about following, and it always sounds to me like something Jesus might sing along the journey. I thought I'd close with this, imagining the invitation of Christ:

*You see I'd like to share my life with you
And show you things I've seen
Places that I'm going to places where I've been
To have you there beside me and never be alone
And all the time that you're with me
We will be at home
Follow me where I go what I do and who I know
Make it part of you to be a part of me
Follow me up and down all the way and all around
Take my hand and I will follow you*

(Words and music by John Denver)

Fall in line behind the love of Jesus and play follow the leader.

Get in line for abundance as it's handed out with your cross. Amen.