

Message: "The Components of Congregational Health" - 8-23-26

Scripture: Romans 12:1-8

¹² I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.^[a]

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 assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of 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 encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Something's been bothering me for awhile and I need to share it with you, and it is this: Is it better to rip the bandaid off all at once, or to gently work it loose slowly? We've all had this experience, I believe, where you've had a bandaid covering a cut for awhile, a day or three; now the bandaid has turned several shades of color darker, it's looking kind of greasy, the gauze is poking out the sides a bit, and it is no longer serving its purpose of protecting the wound as it heals. In fact, it is likely that the wound has healed sufficiently that the bandaid is unnecessary; whatever the reason, it is clear that it is time for the bandaid to go. Now, it's no secret that somewhere in the history of this world some mad scientist was working for a bandaid-making company and created a Frankenstein-type of adhesive that sticks to skin and arm hairs so strongly as to seem permanent and unbreakable; it seems designed to stick for eternity. But eventually all bandaids must come off. So, is it better to strip the bandaid off quickly, along with significant amounts of hair and skin, or is it better to do it slowly, which also tends to remove significant amounts of hair and skin? The pain involved is the real question - is it better to have a lot of pain all at once, or is it better to stretch a hopefully lesser amount of pain over a longer time?

Can we take a poll?

Of course, there are other examples of how to handle painful shocks - for instance, is it better to take foul-drinking medicine in one swallow or try to mix it into some other medium like pudding or milk to buffer the bad taste (but, of course, thereby ruining the taste of the pudding or milk)? Or, is it better to enter a cold swimming pool by jumping instantly into the deep end and get the shock over with fast, or is it better to enter the kiddie side of the pool where you can wade gradually into the deeper and colder water, acclimating more softly but facing the derisive looks of mothers with small children making room for a full

grown adult to temper their fear of the cold by wading through bunches of cold-immune preschoolers? (and in case you are wondering, yes, this has been my own personal experience many times!)

At heart in all of these scenarios is the same question regarding a potentially shocking experience: IS IT BETTER TO RECEIVE THE POTENTIAL SHOCK ALL AT ONCE, OR TO TRY TO GRADUALIZE THINGS OVER TIME? Of course, this matters to faith in terms of the shocking things Jesus would have us do if we follow him, and today we have the most shocking of all such things before us. Most of us approach this shocking declaration with a strong disposition towards graduality, as if to pull the bandaid off slowly or wade into the shallow end first thereby softening the shock; but Paul puts Jesus's shocking revelation before us in such a manner as to clearly define thorough, immediate, and complete immersion without any hint of graduality. So what is this bandaid we are asked to rip off immediately, this freezing water we are expected to jump into all at once if Jesus is to be followed? FOLLOWING JESUS INVOLVES SUFFERING. There, I said it - but you don't seem very shocked. Have you heard this before? Of course you have - but perhaps we've heard it so often that we've become gradualists about its impact, interpreting the suffering expected in terms that are much more palatable to our lives, much more reasonable to our living, or much more aligned with our desires.

I heard another way this truth was put that I believe resonates more with our contemporary mindsets; this is from Rev. Dr. L. Roger Owens who teaches Christian spirituality and ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In this quote he is addressing American Christianity in particular, but what he has to say applies to people of faith everywhere. He says that "Many Christians choose to practice a spirituality of self-assertion. [They are quick to point out their rights to worship as they please, to believe as they please, and to live as they please.] This shows too clearly American—and especially white—Christianity's long-standing **spirituality of entitlement**. This approach to faith has forgotten that Christ's....relinquishing of entitlements—rests at the heart of Christian believing, praying, and living. Because Christians look not to their own interests but to the interests of others. Because there are no Christian entitlements."

Wow! Did you feel the bandaid get ripped off? Did you feel the icy cold as we jumped into the deep end? The Christian faith, the faith that follows Jesus, contains no entitlements. None. No claim to particular rights; no special

provisions for a blessed life; no guarantee that things will turn out the way we hope they will. Period.

I don't like that; do you? I like entitlements; I like having rights; I don't like to give up what is owed me and what I think all humans deserve in order to live fully and happily.....but then, all of that starts with us rather than with God, doesn't it? And going with God seems so very counter cultural as to chase all these things away, all the entitlements that we have come to expect in life. Listen to how Paul puts it in terms of the challenges one can expect if one follows Jesus:

"present your bodies as a **living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the **renewing of the mind**, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.^[a]

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 assigned."

Become a living sacrifice; change how you think; drop your will in exchange for God's; check your ego. Anyone here like to do these things? Now, we've heard all of these self-deprecating injunctions before, directly from Jesus himself to whom Paul is pointing. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" is one way. "No greater love is there than this, that one gives one's life for a friend" is another. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" is yet another. There are countless statements like these by Jesus about how following him means that one word we have carefully defined to mean anything but what it truly means - that word being "SACRIFICE." And what does sacrifice mean but a loss to the self; a check on our desires; a risk to our security; and an invitation to suffer? At least, that's what the world thinks of sacrifice - as primarily something to avoid.

This is an incredibly challenging aspect of our faith because, if you think about it, most of our society is sacrifice-averse; life, after all, is about entitlements, what we rightfully expect to receive from life as a human being. It is assumed that people have certain rights and freedoms just because they are alive, just because they are here. It is absolutely reasonable to pursue self-satisfying endeavors, it is completely normal to look after your own interests, it is expected that each person deserves certain things, like food, clothing and shelter; it is understood that all people, for example, should feel justified in

pursuing the American dream of wealth, material, security, health, and pleasure. "A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage" goes the saying. And what a wonderful world it would be if only that were the case.

But then, enter an interfering God who says the greater life he offers is not primarily focused on entitlements, but sacrifice. It's backwards, its upside down, its counter to the world's understanding - but it is the path laid before those who would follow Jesus; and if it is a path we choose to follow, we will not be able to avoid suffering.

If you're not too depressed by where we have gotten to in this sermon, and you are still able to hear Paul's emphasis, take heart, for he carries this most difficult part of our faith to a wonderfully grace-defined conclusion. Paul speaks about making one's life a living sacrifice, about resisting conformity with the world, changing how we think about things, and keeping ourself out of God's way through proper humility - but then he shifts his focus to how these things can contribute to a more abundant life for ourselves in this world. That shift might be missed but for his outlay of defining attributes of the humility we are to embody in our lives - and it has everything to do with community. "do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think," says Paul, "but think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." ⁴ For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." DO THIS LIFE TOGETHER, is what he is saying; and something even more radical, I think: DO THIS SUFFERING TOGETHER. Face together the life Jesus promotes without entitlements, without special provisions and without guarantee of reward; do things together to see your way through.

I think Paul is simply reflecting something anyone who has faced suffering realizes, and it is this: **HAVING COMPANY MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE. AND HAVING THE RIGHT KIND OF COMPANY MAKES THE GREATEST DIFFERENCE.**

This is where we so very often struggle the most regarding our faith - and why so many people leave Jesus behind. They like his principles, they respect his wisdom, they love the sermon on the mount and Matthew 25's sheep and goats analogies - but they struggle being around others who might not agree with their own understandings; they crave a unanimity of understanding that simply doesn't exist with Jesus except in very misleading groupings of black and white theology and close-minded membership; and they really balk at the invitation to make the

kinds of sacrifices Jesus was really talking about. You may think I'm speaking only about non-Christians, but I am also talking about many if not most Christians as well. Many of the most outspoken Christians in the world have something very much in common with the most self-interested, narcissistic individuals out there - they both tend to leave Jesus behind. They are gradualists when it comes to the sacrifices that come with following Jesus; they make faith into something they direct, rather than something that directs them.

Paul makes one thing clear: Jesus is to be found in community; God is known in the midst of humanity. And though it is true that Jesus resides in the open heart of the individual, one cannot really know this is true on one's own; there needs to be a reflective feedback made possible only through the interactions of meaningful relationships; there needs to be love, given and received, manifest in our living sacrifices made towards each other, love given and received in humility and transformed thinking away from the world's demand for conformity. God expects much more from those who choose the path of Jesus; and God gives much more to those who have made that path their home - God gives us each other. Take a look around you today, right here and now; you are looking at whom God has provided to help see you through this life; you are looking at the ones who have chosen to follow the path of Jesus with you; you are looking at the ones who will help you face whatever life throws your way. And please realize that they are looking at you in the same way. God gives us each other with flaws intact, with various gifts that will never mesh perfectly, but will, if allowed, combine their strength to weather whatever life brings to the one or the many. We begin to understand the incredible power given to those who give themselves to each other, whatever differences are present - we discover that we belong to each other; we discover that Jesus lives in our togetherness; and we discover that we cannot truly know God without each other.