

Romans 12:1-8

12I 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. ²Do 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. ³For 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. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Of the books of the New Testament, Paul’s writings are the earliest. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians around the year 50 CE. Romans, from which today’s reading is taken, was written about 6 or 7 years later. Mark, the oldest of our gospels didn’t appear until 13 or 14 years after that (70 CE).

While Paul became perhaps the most passionate advocate for Christ following his life-changing (conversion) encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, we must remember he was originally a Pharisee named, Saul. We are introduced to Saul in the book of Acts where we are told he watched approvingly while Steven, one of Jesus’ faithful followers, was stoned to death.

Paul – as did Jesus – grew up in a culture that practiced ritual sacrifice. For example, after Jesus was born his parents took him to the temple to present him as their first born son. This ritual normally required the sacrifice of a lamb, but since Jesus’ parents were poor two turtledoves or two young pigeons were an acceptable substitute. (Luke 2:22ff).

Blood sacrifices were meant to honor God for God’s graciousness and favor. They were used in healing rituals, and following cleansing from sin. As adults both Jesus and Paul saw how the external practice of blood sacrifice did not always result in an interior change of heart; something like honoring God with words rather than a change of life.

It’s a poor analogy, but picture a woman’s husband forgetting to plan something special for their anniversary. When he discovers he’s in hot water he goes out and buys flowers, presenting them with many words of apology. His wife forgives him and he is relieved. But what has changed? He is relieved because his “sacrificial” offering got him out of the dog house, but he is likely still the same “dog.”

Paul was presenting a different image; *present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*. I was taken by the phrase, *living sacrifice*. It sounds like an oxymoron? Like *jumbo shrimp*; *authentic reproduction*; *adult children*; or a *fine mess*.

In the culture of animal sacrifice, “sacrifice” meant that an animal’s life was given up; an animal was killed and its blood used in the ritual. Considering this context of sacrifice, it appears that Paul was developing a different meaning for *sacrifice*. So what does Paul mean by his call upon us to present our bodies as a *living sacrifice*?

A man I met over the years I’ve been going to the Weston Priory died last Thursday night. I went to see his wife and son the following day. Those kinds of visits are never easy when grief is so new and raw. What can we say? What can we do? Still we go, we need to go, love says, ‘go.’

So we go. We march our bodies over and humbly present ourselves. Is that not an example of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice? After all, it is not our words that others will remember, it’s our presence. Why is that? It is because our presence carries the presence of God who abides in us through acts of loving care. Presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice is an act of faith, faith in God who always goes with us and moves through us to bless the world.

Have you ever been overtaken by the beauty of the natural world and thought this is surely God’s work? If God is alive, and if we can see God in the miracle of nature, then how much more should we be able to see God in the miracle of a human being? Are we not God’s hands in this world? Are we not holy vessels of God’s presence and love?

What stops us from being those living vessels of God's loving presence? What stops us from presenting ourselves as living sacrifices? I believe Paul put his finger on it when he wrote, *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.*

Do not be conformed to this world. Sadly, "this world" is powerfully judgmental and self-serving. The world we live in prizes success, image, power and control, prestige, status and honor; our world prizes winners and heroes. These are, of course, not bad things. But do these things bring us the wholeness, fulfillment and joy we long for?

It is my experience that offering ourselves in loving service to others is the most fulfilling thing we can do. In the end, the best job in the world can't save us. Nor can any material thing. God is not found in the accumulation of worldly goods. God is much closer than we can imagine. If we truly want to find God, Paul is pointing the way; we must present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

Jesus, speaking about empty ritual said, "*Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*" (Mt. 9:13). His words were based on the prophet Hosea (6:6) who was voicing God's displeasure: *for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.*

So I wonder... what would it look like for the man who forgot his anniversary to present his body as a living sacrifice? What would change? What would be different? How would he make more space in his life for others; *especially his wife!* How would he learn that his joy is found in bringing joy to others? How would he learn that he is a vessel of life for the world? Surely God wants to be known in him, but has he become too conformed to the world.

This is why Paul's image of the Body of Christ is so powerful. We are a many-membered body. We each bring gifts according to our faith. We find wholeness and true joy as we give ourselves – living sacrifices – to the communion of saints. The weaker is lifted by the stronger; the novice is trained by the master; the fearful is held by the brave. It is like an ensemble of musicians, each playing their own part in order to create a unique experience of beauty not possible any other way.

When we give ourselves over to God by offering our bodies as living sacrifices, we allow the Spirit to move us and shape us into something like beautiful music, which has the power to lift the world into the joy of God's peace.

*'With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)*