



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Climbing in the Offering Plate

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

August 24, 2008

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Romans 12:1-8

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is one of the most theological pieces in all Christian literature. In grand detail, Paul describes his understanding of grace—and also shows his developing understanding of what it means to follow Christ, of what it means to give yourself away in discipleship.

But, make no mistake: Romans is difficult to understand. The weightiness of Paul's subject matter alone is enough to make your head spin. Couple that with his sometimes obtuse language and it's really tough to know what he's talking about.

It's difficult enough wherever you turn in Romans, but today's passage is particularly tough. It begins with a "therefore," which means that you have to know what's going on before this section in order to make sense of Paul's words to the church.

"Therefore—I appeal to you 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."

That "therefore" is a direct result of a group of people that could be described as "the very-religious." In fact, that's what my good friend John Peterson, the pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Staunton, once called some people who count those super-religious ancestors as their own, when he described today's very-religious folks, who are perhaps more religious than God, with these words:

"They read only religious books, listen only to religious music, have only religious friends and take only religious classes. In conversation they will talk only God-talk. They won't wrestle with hard questions of faith and life, because they have all the answers.... They know religion's rules and have their Bibles at the ready as a divine rule book to answer any question that may arise on any subject. If you don't agree with them, they simply shake their heads, smile and say, 'I'll pray for you.' Their confidence in salvation is wrapped up as much in being very religious as it is in the redeeming work of Christ in whom they express belief. Religion is a substitute for faith and a dodge for faithfulness. They need only talk the God-talk and act very religious and they'll be okay."

Have you ever met somebody like that? When I was a student at Bethel College, we had a group on campus known as the God Squad. They didn't call themselves that, but everyone else on campus did. In their overzealous and misguided attempts at converting the campus and showing their superior version of Christianity to the rest of us, they did more to set back the faith on campus than to promote it. If that was what it meant to be Christian, most folks wanted nothing to do with it. One of the religion professors there—Dr. Waddle—once remarked about the God Squad to me with more sadness than humor, saying that they were too religious for their own good—or anybody else's."

The God Squad had their converts, to be sure—there was something that seemed so

spiritual about it. But, they did more to set back the Christian cause than they did to promote it, because they suggested that to be Christian was to cut yourself off from everyone and everything that could in any way be seen as a threat. They burned books and music and high school yearbooks if the mascot were the Blue Devils or something similar. Everything that wasn't spiritual enough was cast away, as if cut off from the love of God and God's people.

And that's what was happening in the Roman Church. People kept trying to say that spiritual worship far exceeded anything having to do with ethical living—with being a real down-in-the-trenches human being. And so they called for a denial of the physical and held up lofty moralism as the way to be “spiritual.”

This often translated in removing yourself from the world, turning away from those in need, isolating yourself from the broken-ness and pain and suffering and need swirling around you. To touch any of those things, so went the cry of the spiritualists, is to defile yourself. Be pure. Be moral. Be good. Be spiritual. To all of this Paul said “NO!”

“Therefore, I appeal to you 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.”

“In other words,” Paul says, “to sacrifice yourself as an offering to God is to be spiritual in the best sense of the word.”

Now, here's where it gets tricky—what does it mean to be a sacrifice?

I like the way Frederick Buechner defines it. He says, “to sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love.” “To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love.”

And that's what Paul's urging us to do—to give ourselves away for the love of God. Paul's saying, “When the offering plate is passed to you, just jump right in.”

Viewed in that way, all of life becomes an offering. Everything you do—all the words you speak; all the tasks you do; all the things you do for someone else—all of that becomes an offering to God, which is your spiritual worship.

And here's the best news—you determine how you will do that. We share one calling—one vocation—but the places that calling takes us and the things that calling urges us to do are as diverse as the people who share that calling.

Remember how Paul said it: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” That we are gifted is a given—how we live life with those gifts is up to us.

Obviously, this text for the lectionary couldn't have come at a better time in our congregational life. During the service today, we will celebrate the Blessing of the Backpacks. In doing so we will commission our school children and youth and teachers to remember they belong to God as they enter a new school year. We will be reminding them to live out of their identity as God's beloved children as they walk the halls of their schools, and sit in the classrooms, and eat in the cafeteria. In a real way, we will be inviting them to make their life an offering, to make their ordinary gifts holy by giving them away in love.

But aside from the Blessing of the Backpacks, this text speaks directly to a number of other things we have already done today, or will soon be doing. You have already heard

Bo Hobbie speak about the need for some among us to teach our children this year. I have a strong suspicion that some of you sitting in the sanctuary who heard that call felt the Spirit nudge you, and if that describes you, then by all means speak with Bo or Nancy or me following the service today. There are always significant ways that you can be invested in the lives of these young gifts of God in this congregation.

But something else will happen after the service today as well. The Nominating Committee, which is charged with selecting nominees for the offices of elder and deacon, will begin their task at a meeting following worship. They will begin in prayer, asking God to help them discover people among us whose lives show that they are in the habit of climbing into the offering plate when it passes by them. I ask your prayers for their work, and that you would prepare the hearts and minds of those whom they will call in the months ahead.

In real ways, these opportunities today put flesh on Paul's words. We're inviting you to throw yourself into the offering plate by giving of your time and talents and resources. And, while the church needs you and your gifts to do its work, I'm convinced that you also need to give of yourself in some way. Not simply for the church, but for you. It's part of your vocation.

I like what Buechner said about vocation: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Are there things you love to do? Are there places where the church and the world need those gifts? Where those intersect are the places you are invited to discover, and to offer yourself in the place that addresses that need.

Someone shared a quote with me not too long ago from William Sloan Coffin: "Duty calls only when joy fails to prompt."

Ideally, what we do in service to God through the church will be prompted by sheer joy. There are those times for each of us when even the dreariest task is done with joy. At times we have this amazing sense of the greater good in which we are participating.

But at other times, we will not feel that joy at all. We will feel tired, angry, even resentful that we have to do the task before us. That's true in all areas of life—work, raising children, at home—but it's especially true of the church.

Let me say that it is my hope that it is joy in serving that prompts you to offer yourself in service to God through the ministries of the church. But, let me say this as clearly as I can. If joy fails to prompt you, duty still calls. There are things that this congregation must have to accomplish its mission, and central to all of those things are people with a commitment to get involved.

One of the questions we are asked when we join the church is this: "Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" What that question joins us to is a community whose greatest joy is to worship and serve God. But, in answering yes to that question, we also place ourselves in an arena where duty calls us whenever our joy fails to prompt.

In a few minutes, the offering plate will be passed your way. When it comes to you, remember what Paul said: "Just jump in."