

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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February 2, 2020

Micah 6.1-8; Romans 12.1-8; Luke 2.22-40

Living Sacrifices

Prayer: Loving God you have drawn us together from many different corners of society. In no other setting would we be with one another. But here, your Holy Spirit has formed us into your church, so that we together may be the revealed body of Jesus Christ, to one another and to the world. Open our eyes today so that we may see you in our sisters and brothers as we sit in worship and stand in circle. Amen.

One of the struggles of being Kingdom of God people is that we're also kingdoms of this world people. It's not like we're able to live and move and have our being solely in God's Kingdom, ignoring all else. Which means we carry the thoughts and actions and desires of the kingdoms of this world into the church and into the Kingdom of God. And sometimes, it's rather difficult to know what is of culture and what is of God.

Paul has experienced this struggle, and so, he urges the Romans: "do not conform to the pattern of this world." (12.2) But rather, be different from this world. In the Roman Church think differently than how you were taught to think by Roman culture.

So, in this context, Paul is saying don't let your Roman house churches begin to act like something out of Roman society, or even out of Jewish society, or Greek society, but think differently than that. Don't drag the thoughts and desires and prejudices of society into the church. And when you think differently than the culture around you, you will act differently.

And what is this different thought? Well, it's found in the words "in view of God's mercy." (12.1) That's code, you see, and we may miss the code if we read it too quickly. "In view of God's mercy" act differently.

What does the code mean, we wonder? What is God's mercy?

It's code for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the sacrifice of the Father when God sends the Son. God's mercy is entirely wrapped up in the action of sacrificing the perfection of the Trinity in order to restore the world.

With that thought inserted more explicitly, listen, then, to how Romans 12 begins. "I urge you brothers and sisters, my dear siblings, in view of God's great sacrifice of God's self for us, in view of the death and sacrifice of Jesus the King, I urge you to offer yourselves as a living sacrifice." (12.1)

Paul is encouraging the Christians in Rome to act like God acts – sacrificially. This kind of thought is radically different from the kingdoms of the world in which this church is located.

In the world of Rome, people think about themselves first. They struggle for themselves first. Their own desires, their own cravings, are number one in their life. The stories of debauchery in that society are gruesome. They exercise a form of ruthless capitalism that does not take into consideration their neighbor. You might call it, "Looking out for number one." They simply do business – which means do whatever you need to do in order to succeed.

Paul says, don't carry that worldly pattern into this Roman church. Think differently than that. Which will lead you to act differently. It will lead you to sacrifice yourself for one another.

Then, in the next section, verses 3-8, Paul reveals, with a bit more detail, what it means to be living sacrifices to one another within this Roman church. It means stop carrying your worldly feelings of

power and prestige and rightness into the church. Stop thinking “of yourself more highly than you ought.” (12.3) Stop trying to make everyone look and act like yourself, because most of your actions are cultural. They’re from Roman society. Not from God. Stop the worldly way of thinking.

Instead, think of yourself “with sober judgment, in accordance to the faith God has given you.” (12.3) In this Roman church be Kingdom of God thinkers not kingdoms of this world thinkers. And so, we wonder, what does it mean to be Kingdom of God thinkers, people who sacrifice ourselves thinkers?

Paul says it means that all of the Christian Romans are united together -- the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, the slaves, the free, the men, the women – all of the Christian Romans together create the revelation of the body of Christ to Rome. (cf. 16.1-6) As a group, as a church, they reflect the Christ into the Roman culture. And if they act selfishly, the way they were taught in Roman culture to act, well, then, they have nothing to reflect into this city of Rome. Nothing! Paul puts it this way, “so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (12.5)

He’s saying to this brand-new church, recognize that your diversity is actually a gift from God – not something to be smoothed out and eliminated. You do not all need to do the same things. You do not all need to have the same strengths. You do not all need to act the same way. You do not all need to think the same way. Instead, use whatever gift you bring into the church to help your sibling within the Church of God in Rome. (12.6-8)

Evidently, the individualism of Roman society was being carried into the Church of Rome. The divisions that existed within society, were divisions within the Church. The prestige and honor created in Roman society, is being noticed and followed in the Roman Church.

And Paul says, “No. No. No.” Here, within this church, within God’s Kingdom, we all sacrifice ourselves for one another, we all serve one another, no one’s gift, no one’s ethnic heritage, no one’s religious background, no one’s standing in society, no one’s sex is any greater than anyone else’s gift. Here, in this Roman church, we all together dismantle the hierarchies of the world.

Act like God, who being considerably higher than us, sacrificed God’s self for us. Act like Jesus, who being the very image of God, sacrificed himself for us. You, no matter who you are, sacrifice yourself for one another.

This is a proverbial struggle for the church. Learning to sacrifice for one another, the way Jesus sacrificed himself for us. It’s a struggle not to carry the thoughts and impulses of prestige and honor of the kingdoms of this world into the church and into the Kingdom of God. It’s a struggle not to allow the boxes that are created in society to corral people within the church.

When we think about the day in which we live, we all know that our society is fragmented in a way that we’ve never before witnessed. It’s divided along the lines of young and old, along the lines of male and female, along the lines of white and brown, along the lines of rich and everyone else. And these fissures seem to be growing all around us in our society. And it’s disconcerting. It’s uncomfortable.

And one of the great problems within the American church is that we’re carrying these cultural divides into our churches. And Paul says, no, don’t do that. Sacrifice yourself for one another.

I dare say if President Obama walked into this place today, many of us, would fawn all over him. If General Jim Mattis walked in, some of us would have a physical reaction, and we’d give his thoughts and his words greater honor. Paul’s instructing the Romans that this is nonsense within the Kingdom of God, and nonsense within the Roman church.

Learn to get along with one another, tear down the hierarchies of the world, because you're all necessary to form the body of Christ to Rome.

This lesson remains true for us today. Whatever power, whatever prestige, whatever honor, we have in the world, we leave it at the door. No one is greater or lesser in the church because we all sacrifice our worldly categories, in order that we together are the body of Jesus Christ.

This is not an easy sacrifice. And I know of plenty of churches where the rich call the shots. They control the body of Christ. I also know of churches where the well-educated are considered of greater value. I know of churches where one's ethnic background elevates a person, or, diminishes a person. I also know of churches where the white people are given more honor than the darker people.

That way of thinking is from the kingdoms of this world and it has no place in the Kingdom of God, or within the church. Sacrifice yourselves for one another the way Jesus sacrificed himself for you.

In our own congregation here, I think one of our struggles, is to figure out how to integrate the people who've been here a long time and the people haven't been here a long time, and may have come through the Landing. To figure out how we are all equally together. And to figure out how we are all together the body of Jesus Christ. And I think that this is the way that these words come to us in the most powerful way right now.

Do not insist that everyone who comes, or is here via the Landing, must think the way we think or act the way we act. When in fact we think and act primarily according to who raised us. And we've all been raised by other people and we think differently from one another.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.