

Sermon: A Slice of Romans, Part I: Sacrifice:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 27th 2017 (Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Romans 12: 1, 2

To move, as we have now moved, from a consideration of roughly a dozen of Jesus' parables to a consideration of a portion—a slice—of the Apostle Paul's longest and most substantial epistle, so to move is to travel a considerable distance. And I hope and pray...especially in light of the harshness of the final one of those parables we considered last Sunday...

...I hope and pray that we will not approach Paul with the assumption that we are moving from the domain of the gentle Jesus "meek and mild" to that of the harsh, dogmatic Paul. Both our Lord and his most passionate advocate have their harsh and their gentle sides; both have the capacity to sear us as well as to comfort us with their words. And so let us begin our approach to Paul with the same openness of heart and mind with which we would approach a parable...or some other teaching found in one of the four Gospels. That having been said!

There is no getting away from the fact that Paul is a complex writer...a difficult writer, whose thought is not easily penetrated. That is certainly the case with the Letter to the Romans, a letter that has exerted an incalculably important influence on the shape of the Christian Church for pretty much the entire history of the Church. Then again, its influence—over the past 500 years—within the part of the Church shaped by the Protestant Reformation, gives the Letter to the Romans a prominence for us (as heirs of the Reformation) that it perhaps does not possess for our Catholic or Orthodox sisters and brothers. The fact that it has proven influential, however, does not mean that it is easily interpreted. Quite the opposite. The great Catholic New Testament scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer writes: Romans "overwhelms the reader by the density and sublimity of the topic with which it deals." In a similar vein, N.T. Wright, the great evangelical Anglican New Testament scholar writes of Romans: "What nobody doubts is that we are here dealing with a work of massive substance, presenting a formidable intellectual challenge while offering a breathtaking theological and spiritual vision." And so no: let's not pretend that this brief six-week journey through a slice of Romans will even begin to answer all of the questions and address all of the insights that even this comparatively brief section of the letter holds in store for us....although it should be noted...

...it should be noted that the portion of Romans we'll be examining over the next few Sundays is, in many ways, the least theoretical and most practical section of the letter: a letter which, incidentally, is universally regarded as a genuine letter from Paul, is generally thought to have been written roughly 25 years after the death of Jesus, and is generally believed to have been written as a letter of introduction to a community of faith that Paul himself had not founded, which may explain why it is such

a long letter. The Christians of Rome, for the most part, had not heard Paul proclaim the Gospel, and so—in order to convince them of the essential soundness of his approach to the Gospel—Paul needed to lay it all out for them. Which he does in this letter, articulating his vision of the Gospel in the letter’s first eleven chapters. Only at the start of the letter’s twelfth chapter does Paul begin—in earnest—the process of spelling out the **implications** of the Gospel for how we are to live the Christian life. And yes, that’s where we came in this morning.

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I 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.

With those words—with that opening salvo—Paul launches a new section of this letter, one in which the focus shifts from Paul’s **explication** of the Gospel, to his **application** of how we might live in response to the Gospel. And yes: that’s an oversimplification because we find plenty of application in the eleven chapters that precede those words and plenty of Gospel in the chapters we’ll be reading over the coming weeks. And yet, like any oversimplification, there is a grain of truth to that distinction, because Paul here does launch an appeal: an appeal for his readers to *present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*. In a very real sense, that opening sentence covers everything else we’ll be pondering as we consider this slice of Romans; every paragraph, every sentence, every word, will embody Paul’s thoughts as to **how** we offer “spiritual worship” to God, in ways that are worthy of the Gospel. But before we try to unpack any of that, there’s one word in that opening verse that I have so far been avoiding: a word which, anytime you find it in Paul, you need to stop...catch your breath...and consider the direction in which he is pointing. The word I have in mind...a seemingly innocent, uneventful word, is none other than the word “therefore”. Therefore! Therefore, as in: *I appeal to you **therefore** brothers and sisters. I appeal to you **therefore**.*

And yes: **therefore** is an extraordinarily important word in Paul’s vocabulary: a word which, in effect, says to us: what you are about to read is grounded in that which you have so far been reading. And so if you haven’t grasped what I have been trying to tell you so far, you better go back and reconsider it...because what I’m about to say won’t make a whole heck of a lot of sense unless you understand where I’m coming from...and where I’m coming from is found in the things I’ve been writing about so far! And the unmistakable here, is that unless we have a working knowledge of the argument of this letter’s first eleven chapters, we may badly misread what Paul wants to encourage us to consider starting with the letter’s twelfth chapter. And, of course, the problem here is that those first eleven chapters are the ones that are especially difficult to interpret: the ones that pose precisely the sort of challenge scholars as knowledgeable as N.T. Wright and Joseph Fitzmyer cautioned us to expect in our approach to Romans. Let me be clear: there is no standard, one size fits all, interpretation of those eleven chapters. Nor is there any way for me to do justice to the

full range of interpretations of those chapters that have been offered over the centuries. And so no, I am not going to attempt to summarize the range of views that have accumulated around those eleven chapters these past 2000 years. No: what I am about to propose is something quite different, namely, to give you an unapologetically biased Cook's-tour of those eleven chapters: unmistakably shaped by my own perspectives and viewpoints. So bear with me, now, as I try to summarize those first eleven chapters, in a way that will—I hope—be faithful to the spirit of Romans, and will help us to understand where Paul is coming from when he launches—at the start of Romans 12—his heartfelt appeal to his readers.

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Okay. Remember that in Romans, Paul is introducing himself to a faith-community that was not, on the whole familiar with him. And so he begins—quite rightly—at the beginning, using the first four chapters of the letter to expound on what he regards as the profound rift that has opened up between God and the world God made. Paul, as a Jew, believes that both Jews and Gentiles alike have been impacted by this awful rift between God and humanity. Furthermore, Paul believes that God—through the choosing of ancient Israel and the gifting of the law to Moses—was making a first attempt at healing the rift, an attempt that had its time and place but which has now been utterly surpassed by the defining move God made in the sending of Jesus. That part of Paul's argument reaches its climax with the stirring words found toward the end of the letter's third chapter: words which meant so very much to Martin Luther.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it: the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. And, of course, there is so much that could be said about that statement, and many of the key words found in that statement: words such as righteousness, faith, grace. But for our purposes this morning, the heart of Paul's argument is that God in Christ has done something wonderful for us, something that has profoundly changed the relationship between God and any human being who is prepared to embrace that which God-in-Christ has done. That's the first part...in many ways the key part...of Paul's message in the first eleven chapters of Romans. But, of course, there is more.

In fact: one way of thinking about that which comes next in the letter, is to imagine that Paul—in his head—is considering the argument of someone who responds by saying: “what difference, Paul, does any of that make to the human condition as we live it day by day, not only the human condition of those outside the church but the human condition even of those inside the church. Why so much sin? Why so much suffering?”

Paul, in response, offers a far-ranging meditation on the nature of life-in-Christ, but places a particular focus on the work of the Holy Spirit, as an ongoing agent of

God's love and kindness. That part of Paul's argument reaches its happy climax in what is one of the most beloved chapters—the eighth chapter—in any of Paul's letters. Suffice it to say, that Paul throughout this section of the letter, insists that neither our sinfulness, nor life's continual disappointments and heartbreaks, will be allowed to have the final word, permitting Paul to reach the glorious conclusion that *neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*, a stirring conclusion that gets us closer...but not quite all the way, to the start of the letter's twelfth chapter. Paul has one more item of business to which to attend, perhaps reflecting the fact that the Roman Church included both Jews and Gentiles. And here...here, Paul once again imagines...

...imagines someone asking him a question, namely: "Hey Paul. If God is as good, as you maintain...if God is as faithful as you insist...why has he abandoned most of your fellow Jews, who will have nothing whatsoever to do with the Church.... ...most of whom have rejected this Jesus you proclaim so boldly?" It's a good question, one with which Paul then wrestles in chapters 9, 10 and 11 of Romans: chapters which, sadly, have not been as carefully read—over the centuries—as they ought to have been. And yes: the gist of Paul's argument, quite simply, is that no one should presume that God has eternally rejected anyone! Insisting upon the freedom and the mystery of God's way with us, Paul concludes that *God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all*: words which provide a perfect bridge to our text...

...we finally got there, friends!!

...a text in which Paul launches an appeal to us on the basis...on the basis of the very mercies he has been trying to proclaim for the first 2/3rds of this passionate letter, appealing to his readers, *by the mercies of God—by the mercies of God—to offer a sacrifice—living and holy—as their acceptable spiritual worship*. And yes: if you are anything like me, it may be that word **sacrifice**...that word sacrifice...that raises some alarm bells for you.

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It would be foolish to pretend...foolish to pretend...that sacrifice is not at the very heart of the religious life, as most people in most places have come to understand the religious life. Anyone with even a passing acquaintance with the Bible's third book—Leviticus—will know that chapter upon chapter of that peculiar book...

...most attempts at reading the Bible cover to cover crash and burn about four chapters into Leviticus...

...chapter upon chapter of Leviticus entails precise instructions as to how a whole range of sacrifices are to be offered by ancient Israel. Nor is ancient Israel an exception in that regard; much of the religious life of humanity is grounded upon the instinct that the gods must be placated, that sacrifice must be offered, that

something—at times someone—must be placed upon the altar, in order to restore balance to a world that is always in danger of spinning out of control. And yet the case not only can be made...but must be made...that the entire thrust of Biblical piety, Biblical spirituality and yes, Biblical theology, is an attempt at saying no to all of that. That may sound counter-intuitive, but please consider. Consider, first of all, the story of Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac: the most important part of that story being the moment when God tells Abraham to stop. And yes: consider the central story of the New Testament: Christ's death on the Cross, in which an innocent victim reveals to us just how ugly it is, when we human beings select a victim for sacrifice. And you know: when the Christian tradition tells us that Christ represents not just one in a series of ongoing sacrifices, but represents the ultimate sacrifice, which is to say the sacrifice that is meant to bring the whole series of sacrifices to a conclusion, it's not a matter of our bragging about how much better Christ is than others...rather it is God trying to give us a good shake so that we will stop. So that we will tear down the altars! So that we will stop thinking that we need to find victims for sacrifice. And yes: so that we will stop thinking of God as some awful sadist in the sky, who delights in our suffering. Which is why...which is why...

...of the two adjectives Paul uses to describe the sort of sacrifice he has in mind, one of those words—*holy*—is precisely the word you would expect to find there. Far more shocking is the other adjective: *living...living!*: as in the reminder that the sacrifice God truly wants of us is not that of a dead calf or a dead sheep or a dead human being slaughtered on an altar, but rather a living sacrifice: an offering, an offering, of our very lives. It is not primarily through our dying..but through our living, that we serve and honour and spiritually worship God. This is a God of love! This is a God of mercy. This is a God who loves humanity...and wants us to live lives worthy of that love. That is the beginning and the end of our response to the Gospel. Not in our seeking of suffering...but in our living lives of love, even if that will inevitably mean—in the process—that we will find ourselves enduring much by way of suffering...precisely because love can hurt...precisely because, in the end, true love always involves at least some loss, some hurt, and much in the way of blood, sweat and tears.

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I am reminded...reminded of that terrific CBC television series, now long gone but not quite forgotten: the one Roy Bonisteel hosted for so many years: *Man Alive* Man...alive. What some of you may not know, is that the title of that show was drawn from a text from an ancient Christian writer, a man named Irenaeus, whose most famous quote reads: "The glory of God...the **glory** of God...is man...is the human person...fully alive!" Fully alive. Which is what Paul, in this opening salvo of the "practical" portion of Romans is inviting us to become: living offerings to a God whose love for us is so passionate and so profound, that we are incapable of even beginning to comprehend it, let alone do justice to it in our living. But try we must...and as to **how** we might begin to try to live such lives...as to what the specifics of such a life, the particulars of such a life of love might consist in....

Well! Suffice it to say that Paul will have plenty of particulars for us...starting next Sunday!

Amen!