

15th Week after Pentecost, Proper 16 – Year A – August 24, 2008
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20
Susan E. Wilmot

“Oyez! Oyez! Hear ye! Hear ye! The summons to live according to the Gospel.” While we might be more familiar with the image of a brightly be-breeched medieval town crier, their role as verbal newscasters appears to have been preceded in history by the heralds of ancient Greece. Both men and woman have served as town criers, mostly in times when literacy was low, towns were relatively small, and word of mouth was a reliable way to get news about matters of importance out into the community. And just in case you were wondering, there is an American Guild of Town Criers. It was founded in Philadelphia on July 5, 1997.

Today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans feels like it should start with an exuberant “oyez, oyez”. It contains very important and exciting news for the whole community, known then and now as the Body of Christ. Paul’s letter is a mix of vital ingredients for Christian living: the giving of ourselves as a living sacrifice, spiritual worship, our relationship with God and with one another, the use of our spiritual gifts, and the incredibly beautiful result that God creates from our offering.

“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.” Okay. But what does *that* mean? Embodying our faith as followers of Christ is not a stagnant business. The statement “Christian being” is actually a dynamic equation that begins with the inward spiritual transformation at our Baptism, and continues in that way, as well as with outward and visible signs of our being in Christ. This isn’t a passive, mindless or thoughtless transformation – it is hard work, both mentally and spiritually, and requires nothing less than our best efforts. Our faith through Christ, and with Christ and in Christ demands our intentional, and therefore thoughtful, active participation.

The fount of every blessing in our lives, the eternal source, and essence of our being is God. We don’t have to guess what God means by the phrase “a living sacrifice”, it is described for us in the Hebrew Scriptures of prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea, as well as in the Psalms. In summary it is a sincere desire to do God’s will coupled with patterns of behavior that reflect the intention of our hearts and minds. In other words, presenting ourselves to God as a living sacrifice means a true inner conversion and a commitment to God’s justice. Psalm 51 at verse 17 says this, “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Here’s what the prophet Isaiah says after explaining that God is weary of the sacrifices offered with insincere hearts, “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16c-17). There is already a significant substance behind Paul’s short opening sentence.

Behind the phrase, “spiritual worship” is the understanding that being made in the image of God means we are rational creatures, and when we set our minds towards God, our service to and for God follows. Immediately Paul’s audience would understand that God is and should always be the only focus of our worship. This whole opening to Romans chapter 12 sets out the basis of Paul’s teaching for the Christian community. Living according to the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ means first and foremost that by God’s grace, we love God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our body; and then, in seeking justice and equality we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Next, Paul deals with the implications of our relationship with God, and others. That is not just our relationship within the Christian community, but the responsibility you and I bear to present Christ to the world. Our world is very different from the first century world that Paul lived in. But the word “world” also carries with it a sense of the present age, whenever that is for those who read Paul’s letter. As we have seen faith and life in Christ is organic, it is always alive and growing. It is not bound as though in suspended animation or any way stuck in the first century. The Word lives and breathes

throughout all ages, including the opportunities and challenges of our own twenty-first century. Imagine you are holding one of those malleable foam rubber stress balls. Squeeze hard with your hand and it takes on the unique shape and imprint of your fingers and palm. Now imagine your whole self in the hands of the massive forces and influences of society and culture. Like it or not, you and I are being pushed, pulled and pummeled. We are bombarded with cultural influences. Popular books, music, television, movies, mass media, and our businesses all come fully loaded with socio-cultural philosophies or ideologies, agendas and highly persuasive messages and teachings. Each has a purpose. Be it to create a desire to purchase something, use a particular product, or to try to normalize or regulate how we think and behave. To be sure, not all of these influences are malign. There is a lot of good in the world. However, it also pays to remember that some of the influences and standards we absorb, seemingly by osmosis, frequently do not serve God. As rational beings, we make decisions and choices all the time. The quality of those choices depends largely on the source of the input we use. If we intentionally set our minds to seek God's will first in all things, then our actions will more readily fall into line with God's desire for our lives, irrespective of what the rest of the world thinks and does, according to worldly standards. This is how we are patterned into Christ-likeness by the hand of God, and that is a very different and much more beautiful shape than the hand of the world.

Paul has an inkling that the church at Rome has some divisions within it. Given the historical situation, it is likely. The Church at Rome suffered a forced division through the action of the Emperor Claudius in 49 A.D. Claudius banished all the Jews – Christian or otherwise -- from the city of Rome. They were not allowed to return until Nero became Emperor in 54 A.D. At the time Paul writes his letter to the Church in Rome, sometime between 54 and 59 A.D., an opportunity for a fully integrated Christian community irrespective of ethnic origin may have been lost. Local practices in Rome may have taken on a different style and flavor than those familiar to the returning Christians of Jewish origin. Similarly, there was probably a striking difference between the economic situations of those who were forced to flee Rome and those who were allowed by Imperial edict to stay. Here's what Paul has to say about the judgmental attitudes of some Christians in Rome. "I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment." He goes on to remind all that no Christian community can afford to consider some members to be more or less valuable than others, because the truth of God's blessing to you, to me, and to all Christians is that we need each other.

The point is that our spiritual gifts are functionally different, and yet highly complementary. This is so that you and I -- this whole community -- can do the ministries God has called us to do. Paul uses the image of a body frequently to convey his message. Christ is the head, and every single disciple of Christ has a specific function within the rest of the Body. Except by the magic of T.V. and movie editing, you don't see many legs wandering around without hips or feet! The interconnectedness of our bodily parts represents the interrelatedness of our spiritual gifts. Exercising our spiritual gifts is our right worship of God and our contribution to the life of God's community. We have all heard and maybe met a few people who we consider to have great *charisma*. In worldly terms, that often means someone who can attract a great deal of attention and a lot of followers, often through persuasive speech and leadership. What if I said that every single person in this room has *charisma*? Would you be inclined to agree or disagree? What if I redefined *charisma* in Godly terms? What if I said that *charisma* is the sense of God's graciousness that you, me, and every Christian has the opportunity to communicate to others as we choose to exercise our God-given gifts?

We all have *charisma*. God has granted each one of us stewardship of our gifts. As we so choose, together we can by God's grace, continue the work of transformation within and beyond this community in ways that honor and glorify God more fully than ever before through our mutual practice of God's graciousness. "Oyez! Oyez! Hear ye! Hear ye! God's desire that we continue to honor God by living in community according to the Gospel."

Amen.