

The Body of Christ
Romans 12:1-8
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign for 8/27/23
by Judi Geistlinger

While summer is often a time of slowing down, this summer was so busy for me. At my full-time university job, I helped plan for and train campus staff for a new software-based telephone system that went live in July. I preached here a few times, and sermon writing really takes me a very long time. As July wrapped up, I felt like I really need a pause, so I could take a deep breath.

I spent a week in the glorious mountains of Montana with fellow Presbyterian pastors. The purple mountain majesties were just what my heart needed, especially when I could the quarter-mile walk down from the lodge to the lakeshore and hear the lapping of the waves. It was a glorious time away. I wanted little more than some time away that week, worshipping God in what I refer to as a Holy Place, one of deeply fond memories of a wonderful family vacation at Glacier National Park decades ago. This retreat or “camp” was perfectly timed before the semester started, it was staffed by one person of whom I have several resource books on my shelf (unbeknownst to me beforehand), filled with others who love to sing and are eager to share how they were planning worship for the rest of the calendar year. I got much accomplished, I was fed spiritually, and I rested in a glorious place.

The first night we arrived in Montana, occurred during the annual Perseid meteor shower. After a long day of travel, my roommate and I just could not stay up long enough for the sky to darken sufficiently to catch a falling star. So, at 1 am we woke up and took ourselves outside to the large grassy field halfway down to the lake. We stood there on the grass, in our pajamas and gym shoes with our heads tilted back scanning the sky for shooting stars, (okay, Bryan our Aerospace engineer and sound guy, I know that is not the

technical term.) Within a minute one bright streak across the sky later and we were hooked with a “Did you see that?”

We discovered constellations and the Milky Way, even with a few lights shining from the cabins. Seeing the Milky Way, knowing we are part of that galaxy, of stars lightyears away, tends to help me understand once again my place in this world.

The rugged edges of the mountains brought to mind the tremendous forces of nature. Nature’s grandeur has a way of reminding me how small I am, how mountains are thousands of feet high, lakes so clear and so deep, and yet I am a tiny little speck in comparison. It is humbling.

I was reminded of the paradox of Psalm 139, of a Creator of all, and yet:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path
and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven,
you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and night wraps itself around me,"^[a]

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Darkness was not dark that night, because the sky was full of thousands of stars.

God, our Creator, was so very present to me that second week of August. The One who made the stars of the heavens, and yet can discern my thoughts from far away, this is the God I experienced.

Each morning, I woke before dawn to catch the light show of heaven as I waited on the sunrise.

I took way too many photos as I tried to capture the awe, the mystery of creation and our God who created us each one.

God did create each one of us with individual gifts and talents and desires and hopes and worries, unique.

Therefore

There is so much imagery in today's passage, so many words that capture my attention every time I read it. One word that stuck me really fits this particular Sunday.

Therefore

The first sentence in our passage: "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."

Therefore

Therefore, is a connecting word, connecting the first 11 chapters of the book of Romans to the other half. The first part of Romans is all about who Jesus

is, who God is and that having faith in God through Jesus is sufficient. The first part of Romans is packed with theology and talks about how the old rules don't matter in the same way any longer, now that Jesus has come. Faith is what is most important to Paul in Romans. What comes next is how we are to live this out. Having faith is one thing. It is in living out our faith that makes us who we are. It is what sets us apart.

Together we can live out our faith. Sure, we can be Christians without being a part of a community, but it is in community that we can truly be the body of Christ. Paul is telling us that we need to understand our place in the body. Don't think too highly of yourself, but also, I believe we are not to sell ourselves short either. All of us, each and every one of us, has been gifted by God for service.

Hinge Sunday

I think this particular Sunday in the life of First Presbyterian Champaign, is a hinge Sunday. Matt and Rachel are off at Montreat learning about Transitional Ministry. One week from today, our next Associate Pastor, Reverend Joe Lundy is joining us as Associate Pastor! And the month of September is my last one on staff here, as a transition to a new season.

Yes, we have a new, young, full-time pastor for discipleship to lead us, but friends, this is not the time to step back. No, we cannot all relax that our pastoral staff is once again complete. No, we need to step up and answer the call, that nudge from God, to bring hope to a world that needs it so desperately.

Call

Today's passage reminds me of why I was drawn to my particular route to ministry. You see, I am a firm believer that we are each one of us called. I know I say it often, but I believe it deep in my bones. Our baptism means we are washed clean of our sins, engrafted into the family of God, and equipped to serve.

To serve, as we have been called.

There is a tenet to our Reformed faith, that is the priesthood of all believers. It means that we are all on the same footing with God with every other child of God...no one is above any other. We are all equal in the access we have to God as well as the love we receive as part of God's family.

It is in baptism that we have been equipped. David Gambrell of PC(USA) writes:

“In the sacrament of baptism—our inclusion in the covenant of grace, incorporation into the life of Christ, and anointing with the gifts of the Spirit—we have countless reasons to give God thanks and praise. As Jesus said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). Filled with the never-failing grace of Jesus Christ poured out for us, our hearts overflow with gratitude and joy, spilling out into the world in lives of **service** and love for God and neighbor.”¹

I am a firm believer that our baptism is all that is needed to be called by God. God's spirit dwells in us and uses us to serve.

That service is just what Paul is talking about in today's passage.

Some of us are called to preach...John, Gary, Dave, and Betty have all answered that call during this season to share the hope of Christ in the form of our Amateur Preaching ministry this year. I too, have felt called, and took a slightly different route, starting with Amateur Preachers and going through the Commissioned Lay Pastor training program 20 years ago. Not all of us are called to preach, of course.

But friends, like this morning's scripture said, we need **all** the body parts in the Body of Christ.

I like the way the First Nations Version of the New Testament puts it:

Creator's gift of great kindness has been poured on us in many ways, giving us different kinds of gifts. If your gift is to speak the heart and mind of the Great Spirit in a prophecy, then let trust guide your words. If your gift is helping others, then give yourself to help others. If

¹ <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/1/21/what-presbyterians-believe-baptism/>

teaching is your gift, teach well. If your gift is to speak courage and strengthen the hearts of others, then speak bravely. The one whose gift is giving should not hold back. If your gift is leading, lead with honor. And the one whose gift is showing mercy and kindness to others should do so freely, with a glad heart.² (Romans 12:6-8 FNV)

Body

Using the description of God's community, the church, as a body, and us as individually members of the body, we all have a part to play. All are needed. None is better or more worthy than the other. No person is better than another, and no gift is better than another.

The gifts Paul describes are all gifts that are not self-serving. They are to help others and require others to be useful at all.

Sure, when I was a little girl, I played "teacher" to my stuffed animals, but we know teachers share with students knowledge and skills that help them succeed in life. Preachers can explain and proclaim the word of God, but unless there are people to hear, preachers themselves have no value. It is the same with those gifted with prophecy, not so much to be future tellers, but I think of prophets as consequence forecasters, urged to share what will happen if listeners follow a certain path. Givers are needed to share what they have...it can be two copper coins, money for a new hospital wing, or shoes for kids headed back to school. Paul talks about a few gifts that the community needs...prophecy, services, teaching, encouragement, and these are just a few of the gifts we are called to embody. None of these are any better than the other, but I would say that some gifts may seemingly be tiny and perhaps of no "value," but I tell you, I don't think I could stand here in the pulpit if it were not for the encouragement I receive in return. I would deeply miss the beaming smiles from some of you lifting me up and encouraging me to speak the words God has nudged me to utter. God uses each of us to serve as we are needed.

² Romans 12:6-8, First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament published by InterVarsity Press

Imposter syndrome

At staff this week I mentioned that this week would be the Judi show, since I am the lone pastoral staff member present this day. I meant it completely tongue in cheek, meaning that I would be doing all the parts. While I do sometimes feel like an imposter, putting on the robe of ministry, I do also feel empowered to share what I find in the scriptures that God is nudging me to say. At staff, Matt made it clear that it is really the God show. It is not about me. Worship is never about who is up front, proclaiming, praying, singing, or playing an instrument, no, it is always about God. All of the folks up front today are sharing their gifts, to the glory of God.

Whenever I share with people how I feel like an imposter sometimes, unworthy to fill the role I am serving as a preacher or pastor, I get reminded by others who have gone to seminary (when I have most decidedly not) and others who sit in the pews, that I am indeed called to serve God in this particular way. It is not about me at all; it is about God.

God calls each of us to be the body of Christ in this place and to go forth from here in service. My call is not going to look like yours. If we are the body of Christ together, then all of us are needed to share our gifts to be the body at work in the world.

Teresa of Avila

It is the imagery Paul shared in his letter to the Romans that inspired Teresa of Avila to write:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.³

— St. Teresa of Ávila (attributed)

Amen

³ <https://catholic-link.org/quotes/st-teresa-of-avila-quote-christ-has-no-body-but-yours/>