

Romans 12:1-8

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. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16:13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon Message for August 23, 2020

Pleasant Street and St. Luke's UMCs - Salem and Derry, NH

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A few days ago a sister in Christ shared an experience with me that she had had while waiting in line at a local pharmacy here in New Hampshire. She had been experiencing some amount of pain throughout that day, that was not getting any better, and since it was late at night, she had had to drive a fair distance to get to a 24-hour pharmacy for her prescription medication. When she walked into the CVS or Rite-Aid, a quick glance around the space told her that she would be in for a long wait, since there was only one pharmacist at the desk, and there were a number of people there, waiting in line. She was already feeling uncomfortable about being there alone, so late at night, in pain, and so naturally she felt a wave of frustration and disappointment, knowing that she would be spending the next half-hour or so standing in line instead of asleep in her bed, which would have been her first choice just then. It so happened, however, that earlier in the week she had been teaching a Sunday school class at church a lesson about waiting. She had even shared with the children how important it was to be especially attentive to God in those times when we are called to wait, since we generally are not all that available to God in those moments. It seems God has a sense of humor about this kind of thing, because here she was, now presented with the perfect opportunity to practice the very skills and perspectives she had brought to those kids just a few days before.

So instead of continuing on in those feelings of disappointment and frustration, she prayed, asked God to use her in that place however he would, breathed a few times, and set about her work. She turned to the person behind her in line and struck up a conversation. After some small talk, she learned what had brought that person in for a prescription at that late hour. Soon, other folks were chiming in with their own maladies, and before long the whole area was alight with conversation. Then, a recent

arrival to this suddenly friendly pharmacy line shared what had brought him there. He had come in to pick up a prescription to treat his one year-old son's ear infection, he said. The baby was out in the car, screaming, where his mother was looking after him. At this point my sister-in-Christ paused, and, asking the people behind her if it would be ok with them if she did so, offered this harried father her own place in line. Everyone agreed without objection, and he moved up to her spot. Well, that would have been pretty neat in and of itself, but then something even more remarkable happened; the people in front of him offered him their places as well, and he went from her spot right up to the very front. After that, the whole group spontaneously decided to arrange themselves in line by order of their ailments, measuring whose need was most urgent and moving on down the line, after the young father.

When my sister-in-Christ finally stepped up to the pharmacist's counter, the person looked at her with widened eyes and asked, "What are you? Some kind of magician? That never happens." My sister-in-Christ replied, "Well, I had help," and made a gesture toward heaven. The pharmacist just shook her head and laughed, "That was amazing."

And God is amazing. In today's passage from Romans, we hear Paul's appeal to those receiving the letter to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, as a spiritual act of worship. While there weren't any hymns or scripture readings happening in the pharmacy that night, no praise songs, not even a sermon message, those folks waiting in line there, the pharmacist, my sister in Christ - each of them took part in worship. It all began with a subtle, yet powerful shift in perspective, and a prayerful determination on the part of one person to present herself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. And God honored her prayer.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapters 14 and 15 reveal that Paul is addressing his writing to Jewish and Gentile Christians living in Rome in

the latter half of the first century, a multi-ethnic gathering of Christ-followers. While Paul had not visited this body of believers personally, he was aware of some of the conflicts that had arisen among them, divisions along the lines of practice and culture, especially, as we read in chapter 14, around dietary habits and the celebration of special days. A theme verse for the whole letter, understood in these terms, is from chapter 15. Verse 7 reads: "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." The Gentile and Jewish Christians had not been getting along well, and Paul wrote Romans to speak to the common unity they had, the perfect love now available to Jew and Gentile alike, these historical enemies, through Christ's redemptive work on the Cross. Romans is a masterpiece of writing, and many scholars believe that Paul wrote pastorally to the community, to bring these disputing factions of believers into greater harmony.

In verse 2 of chapter 12 we read, "Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The lesson my sister in Christ had brought to her Sunday school class, the way her mind had been renewed, was through a single insight, a subtle shift in perspective that had dawned on her as she had sat in a restaurant one day: waiters are also called servers. In that context, to wait and to serve are synonymous. As she turned the idea around in her head, if waiting can also be serving, she began to consider what it would look like to serve others during those times she found herself waiting. Her brainstorming brought Scripture verses to mind, and Christ's teachings to those who would follow in his way to serve as he served. Opportunities for service-waiting abounded, she discovered, as grocery line experiences suddenly became ripe with possibilities to reach out to a stranger with a kind word, and visits to her doctor a chance to share the love of Christ spontaneously, and freely, since each experience she had was prayerfully grounded, and she followed the Spirit's lead as she went along. Her life became a lot brighter and filled with wonder and beauty, and so did the lives of the people around her, not just those strangers she purposely served in Christ's name, but

also her family and other folks with whom she shared her experiences. Friends, it is so easy to dwell in self-pity and irritability when called to wait. I know that's my go-to, so much of the time. Our lives habitually bring us to situations where we are called to wait. Whether it's in line, whether it's for this virus to finally run its course, whether it's for recordings of church services to upload to YouTube, (a special shout-out and thanks to our audio/visual team), or whether it's for this nation to live into its ideals. But what if waiting was indeed serving? What if everyone made it a point to approach life this way? How would the world look then? How much of our God-given energies, talents, perspectives, ideas, gifts and graces would begin to just overflow, and God's blessings show up powerfully, tangibly, to reveal the depths of love and care, compassion and grace our Creator God has for each one of us? Pursuing this line of questions is just one of many ways that we can be transformed through the renewing of our minds, re-patterned by the promptings and movements of the Holy Spirit.

I love the story of the pharmacy, because it displays so powerfully God's sovereign will to bless people. This world in its patterns so habitually operates on an economy of zero sum gain. If I win you lose, if you win I lose, and we all are locked in perpetual competition and struggle to pursue, obtain, earn, or otherwise acquire some share of the limited resources that are out there. Imagine if my sister in Christ had decided to continue nursing her frustration at having to wait, and spent her time silently looking at the ceiling instead of heavenward, or at the items on the shelves or the books on the rack, or her phone, and had just kept to herself. Imagine then that the young father had walked straight up to the front of the line in silence, and cut everyone else in line because his situation was more urgent than theirs, how that group of people would have responded then. It's not hard to see how a small investment of faith expands out exponentially to reveal an entirely new reality, just beneath the surface. "With faith the size of a mustard seed," said our Lord, we will move mountains. God's economy of grace is the only domain of life in this world in which we experience a win-win proposition. Something different, something miraculous, something

mysterious and holy happens when God is on the scene, through our risen Lord, Jesus Christ! And we get to take part in God's holy mission work to bless others as we call out to him in faith. In Christ, God's forgiveness and mercy extend beyond the highest star and reach into the deepest hell. His mercies are new each morning, our sins are forgiven. "As far as east is from the west, so is our sin before God," and when we believe in his redemptive work on the cross, through his resurrection from the dead, receive it for ourselves and within our being, we are made to be new creations in Christ, participants in that resurrection power and glory. The pharmacy story also offers a window into how someone is purposefully learning to apply the gifts that God has given her by grace, to the building up of those around her (Eph 4:12), by faith. We are, as Paul writes, all members of one another, and as we looked at last week, the abundance of God's banquet table expands well beyond those boundaries and categories we so often seek to impose, our earthly understanding of who is in and who is out, who are so-called winners and so-called losers, who belongs and who doesn't.

In chapter 11, Paul has just written about how all people, regardless of their heritage, their culture, their race, or positions of advantage or disadvantage in human terms: all of us have walked the road of disobedience before a holy God, all have sinned in some way shape or form. But, and here Paul marvels at God's wisdom and unsearchable ways, all have been given over to disobedience so that God might display his mercy to all. Chapter 11 verse 36 reads: "Everything comes from God alone. Everything lives by his power, and everything is for his glory."

"Therefore, in view of God's mercy to all," don't go through life focused on external conditions, on circumstances, on who wins or who loses, who is in or out, but set your sights on God, and ask how God might use you, by measure of your faith, wherever you are, in service in God's name to whomever you meet.

You may hear this story and say, “Well, that’s pretty cool, but I’m really not all that outgoing. I feel shy about talking to people, especially while waiting in line. I just wanna be on my way, especially since I’m wearing a mask, and it’s just awkward.” That’s fine, but don’t think you’re off the hook. Paul thought of you, too. In verse 7 he writes: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” Every other Wednesday I get to witness the ministerial gifts of PSUMC in your food pantry, and St. Luke’s in your free take-out Saturday meals. For others, I hear of your gifts of service to your family members or out in the community, gifts of teaching and encouragement, of recognizing a need and stepping up to take care of it. I witness and experience your gifts of prayer and administration, of hospitality through cards and fresh vegetables, your commitment to the behind the scenes work of the church, and I know that so many more gifts are among you all, even though I haven’t met so many of you. How might God be calling you to be transformed today, tomorrow, this coming week, through the renewing of your mind? And I would like to hear from you. Please write, email, or call me to share how God has invited you to stretch your faith in bringing your gift to bear through the Holy Spirit’s prompting! Share with one another. Let’s celebrate the generosity and goodness of God as a family of faith.

I would like to share one last story before we close. A few years ago, a twenty-something showed up for the first time at our small home group gathering in Worcester. She had been invited to come some days before by her stepfather, who had had a powerfully transformative encounter with Christ and was anxious to make amends with his family. His stepdaughter had not been speaking to him. The stepdaughter was curious about the meeting, but felt very uncertain. Was this for real? Earlier that day, however, as she had been wrestling with the whole idea of whether or not to go to the small group meeting with those Christians, and her stepfather

she stepped down off a city bus in Boston where she attended college, and a complete stranger came up to her and said, “-----.” She pulled her earbuds out of her ears to be able to hear the stranger. “Excuse me,” said the woman, “I just wanted you to know that God says you should not be afraid to go to that meeting tonight, and would like you to go.” Her awestruck tones as she shared her story brought awestruck responses as we listened, in the very meeting God had assured her she could come to without fear. We laughed, cried grateful tears, and prayed; we took great joy in God’s miraculous ways of pursuing our hearts to display the kindness and love of Christ, through willing servants ready to listen and act on God’s behalf. And that family experienced a powerful moment of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Now, I can’t say that I hear that clearly from God, to deliver such a specific message to someone on the street, especially to someone wearing earbuds. That’s not my particular gifting of faith. But that woman’s experience with God, her trust in the Spirit’s guidance, had indeed gifted her in that particular way. Paul writes, in the section immediately preceding our passage from today: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?”

35 “Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?”

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.”

I have yet to meet so many of you. It’s by faith that I even speak to you the way I do, through this marvel of technology that is the interweb. I don’t know where you are in your journey with Christ, or what the condition of

your heart is today, but can I encourage you to be transformed today, through the renewing of your mind? God's kingdom is awaiting your contribution, by faith, to the building up of your brothers and sisters and for the glory of God's holy, majestic name.