

23 August 2020: Romans 12:1-8 (Proper 16)

From today's Epistle: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

The ancient peoples knew about sacrifice. Jews and pagans had sacrificial systems in which animals were ritually killed as offerings to the deity. Jews did not believe these were food for God. The point was to offer God something that was first, best, and dearest as representing one's faith and trust in God. If God indeed provides for us from the abundance of his mercy, then offering the first, new lamb is an act of faith.

In our day, the word 'sacrifice' is almost exclusively associated with heroism leading to death, as when a soldier or police officer makes the 'ultimate sacrifice'—their life. Such is sacrifice; but Paul sees something broader, more all-encompassing. Paul writes of a *living sacrifice* beyond the old animal sacrifices. Central to Paul's teaching is the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross; he expands the meaning for Jesus' followers in calling us to live our lives as expressions of Jesus' sacrifice.

He begins his call to sacrifice with *the mercies of God*. Sacrifice is born of God's mercy, most beautifully manifest in Jesus' sacrifice. To believe in Jesus means we enter first-hand God's infinite mercy for oneself and for all. As we receive Jesus' sacrifice, we know God's mercy; knowing God's mercy converts us. This is a decidedly different "take" on Jesus' sacrifice than is sometimes preached. Here, Jesus' passion and death is not seen as primarily a judicial remedy—that is, appeasing God's anger caused by our breaking of law—but as the ultimate sign of God's loving-kind mercy, the means through which all fallen humanity may be restored to right relationship with God. It may seem like a small change of emphasis. However, is there not a world of difference between appeasing a God full of wrath and accepting a loving God's extraordinary mercy?

Paul then writes *...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*. We receive Jesus' sacrifice and thereby know God's mercy, which changes us to become sacrifices of God's mercy for others. Sacrifice is always intercessory, always 'on behalf of.' In combining the words 'living' and 'sacrifice' Paul presents a paradox. Everyone knew sacrifice meant death for the animal offered. Our sacrifice is living. We are to be a continual, constant self-offering to God; our response to knowing God's mercies is not a one-time thing, not a Sunday-only thing, not something expressed in a narrow, 'religious' way. Second, a living sacrifice is how one lives in all relationships and environments, from the most intimate to the most mundane. We witness to God's desires for us and the world not by special, grand gestures but by the way we live daily. Our sacrifice is also living because it is not a series of periodic, vaguely connected episodes. We end one day in expectation that tomorrow will give more opportunities to live our commitment to Jesus Christ more deeply. Such sacrifice is also living in that it is not piecemeal but encompasses the whole person: soul, mind, emotions, thoughts, words, actions, and our bodies, day by day.

Paul writes that our sacrifice is to be *holy and acceptable*. Paul's term 'holy' does not mean perfect but our best: not the cast-offs, not leftovers; not sacrifice as an afterthought. Jesus called 'great' the sacrifices of the poor. By the world's standards, their gifts were pathetic. By Jesus' standards the sacrifice was priceless because they offered the first, best, and richest the person had; sacrifices from hearts filled with God's mercies.

An *acceptable* sacrifice accords with God's desires for the giver and the receiver. Giving away cloths is wonderful; but if the receiver is starving, there is a more acceptable sacrifice to be made. In sacrifice, the object—the one for whom the sacrifice is offered—is of more importance than the subject—the one who gives the sacrifice. Here is a reminder that before we act, we pray, seeking God's will for ourselves and others.

Only after Paul teaches about sacrifice does he write: *...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect*. The pathway of conversion is sacrifice: the offering of ourselves to God on behalf of others in thanksgiving for God's mercies. This is the antidote for judging others, and gossip; it heals us from stinginess and greed. Sacrifice grows mercy in us. If God treasures *your* sacrifice, then surely you can accept the frailty of your brothers and sisters; surely you can be merciful by sacrificially sharing God's mercy with them. Amen.