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21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Year A  
University Presbyterian Church  
Tuscaloosa, AL  
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*O Lord our God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may be obedient to your will and live always for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.*

## **ACCORDING TO THE GRACE GIVEN TO US**

### **ROMANS 12:1-8**

It rained yesterday, and it felt like pure grace to me. Maybe it was because I was exhausted; maybe it was because I have been watching you adjust to the beginning of the academic year. The beginning of a term is exciting, and yet there is the inevitable “let down” that reminds us to observe a Sabbath, God’s commandment to be at peace, to be at rest. Now that everybody is back in town, church committees are meeting more frequently; it feels as if we are gaining momentum, not by our own efforts, but by the grace that God gives to us.

The fall in Tuscaloosa, especially at UPC, contrasts sharply with the summer. University Boulevard is not the only place that traffic is thickening. Stop by the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> Street and 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue sometime during the week, and you will understand. The summer at times seemed ghostly, quiet, yet still inhabited by a gentle Spirit. In the fall, there is hustle and bustle, a tightening, signaling that the pendulum is swinging, and I pray that you will not fly off the handle. I pray that, as the pendulum swings, you will feel God reaching down and nestling you, like a pharaoh’s daughter reaches down to calm a baby in a basket.

The first thing that I do when I open the Scriptures is pray that God will open them to me. Then I give God a magic marker, one a color of the rainbow, and pray that a particular part of it will come alive to me. In all Scripture, especially this passage from Paul’s epistle to the Romans, the possibilities are

limited only by human fallibility. One body, many members: The phrase has almost become cliché. The opening appeal “brothers and sisters” is enough to evoke suspicion, especially after all those stories in Genesis about Joseph and his brother (there are more subplots to that story than there are colors in his amazing techni-color dream coat). For me, it is almost instinctual: When somebody calls me “brother,” I ask, “What do you want? To whom I make the check payable?”

Then there is Paul’s notion of sacrifice: “Present your bodies as a...sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” Oh, with this sentence, we may as well announce, “Let the self-pitying begin!” Why? Because, unfortunately, faith sometimes becomes an exercise in wound-licking: Religious bodies grumble about statistics or finances or why this one is bigger than that one. Bigger, richer entities feel unduly criticized by prophetic voices crying out in the wilderness while the ones trudging through the wilderness celebrate suffering as a sign of God’s grace. Paul seems to be saying that each group needs the other and that lamenting one’s lot in life is beside the point. The “woe-is-me” prayer has its place in Scripture (for example, in the Psalms), but it is not end in itself. Martyrdom will be the subject of Justin Watson’s presentation next Sunday. This Sunday, Paul seems unwilling to listen to, and perhaps impatient with, self-described martyrdom (if, in fact, it is even possible to be a self-proclaimed martyr), because (and you probably noticed this), the injunction is not that we present ourselves merely as sacrifices, but that we present ourselves as *living* sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. Living sacrifices are vibrant, vital and Spirit-filled. They are the ones that Paul deems acceptable and pleasing to God.

Maybe Paul is unwilling to listen to, and impatient with, self-imposed martyrdom, because the image of a crucified Messiah is emblazoned on his heart and mind. This nail-torn body is the body for him. We are its members: fingers, toes, capillaries and gall bladders. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the chief end and aim of our mission, of our life together. “But Jesus loves me...so God will bless me...and if God does not bless me, then there is something wrong with world...the devil...Clemson Tigers...and all that!” God’s grace in Jesus Christ is truly amazing. By his sacrifice, each and every one of us is capable

of feeling loved; but, as difficult as it may be to accept, God is not a capitalist. God is not an American, and God is not a Crimson Tide fan (Is it time for me to put together a PIF?). The Gospel does not call us to be babied. The Gospel does not call us to be entertained. The Gospel calls us to sacrifice, to be holy and acceptable; to be pleasing unto God. If our faith is driven by anything else, it becomes impossible to know the will of God. Paul's language is: "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."

Observation: Paul, whose relationship with Jesus Christ begins by being blinded on a road to Damascus, speaks of faith in terms of the brain, of renewal of the mind. By now, he has gained---God has given to him---an appreciation of a wide range of faith experiences. He appreciates transformation, and he appreciates renewal, which by the way are not exactly the same. If I am transformed, I change fundamentally; I become something else, something completely different from what I am now. If I am renewed, I am essentially the same person that I was before, but rejuvenated, perhaps with a clearer focus. God transforms, and God renews "according to the grace given to us," which is the phrase that I simply could not ignore in preparation for this sermon.

The second paragraph in this part of the epistle begins, "For by the grace given to me (Paul) 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." Sober judgment: Who has that, especially when figuring out how *not* to be conformed to this world? Have you noticed how differently the phrase "this world" is interpreted in the church? For one part of the body, the world to which we should not be conformed is wealth, efficiency and/or corporate-mindedness. For another part, the world to be resisted involves drinking, cussing and chewing (or dancing with anyone who does). For yet another part, scientific research and literary-historical criticism of Scripture seem cancerous. For still another part, the demon to be exorcised is complacency or unwillingness to change. Then, of

course, when one part of the body starts arguing a particular point to another part of the body, it becomes difficult to obey Paul's commandment that we not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think.

Self-absorption is intoxicating. Or I suppose another way to say this is: Being intoxicated by one's own thoughts, feelings and disposition comes naturally. It is a curse of being human; it is the art of self-deception. Navel-gazing is unattractive (especially when you consider some of the navels that are out there to gaze), and insulating one's self with like-minded individuals may help to camouflage insecurities that serve as bitumen and pitch for building the fortresses behind which we hide and then judge our neighbors on the other side.

The sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God is humility, and humility is difficult to attain. As soon as you feel as if you have attained humility, it slips through your fingers, runs down your shirt and leaves a mess in the floor for everybody to step in! How then are we to judge ourselves? Paul says "by the measure of faith given to us." Not against ourselves, not against our neighbors, but by the measure of faith given (not earned). Then and only then, we will be transformed. We will be renewed for prophecy, for ministry, for teaching, for exhortation, for generosity, for leadership, for diligence, for compassion and for cheerfulness. When we are transformed, when we are renewed, it will feel fresher and purer and gentler than rain on a Saturday morning in August in Tuscaloosa, Alabama! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.