

August 27, 2017 • Blessing of the Backpacks

“On the power of contentment; or resisting the need to one up.”
Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



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. 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.

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 judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 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.

This past Monday our country paused for just a moment to marvel at the wonder of this universe. Who had a chance to see the eclipse on Monday? I was here in the office and I made my way down to our courtyard where a group of our preschool teachers were out sharing a single pair of eclipse glasses. I added my pair of glasses to the mix; each of us taking a turn to peer upon this incredible phenomenon.

After spending a few minutes in our courtyard, I decided to walk around the block sharing my glasses with as many people as possible. It was a joy to not only be able to share but to witness different people's reaction to such an event. Every single person's response was in the same vein, a blend of awe mixed with a little bit of hope and a whole lot of joy.

It felt like the eclipse was just the thing that we needed at this time and this place in our life together.

With all that's swirling around in our world, the never-ending, always insisting newsfeed that comes pouring into our pockets via our phone every single minute of the day.

In the midst of this, when it sometimes feels like the weight of the world is pressing down a little bit harder, what a gift it is to look up and to gaze at the heavens in all their glory.

It's kind of crazy how this simple act of looking up to witness a solar eclipse brings with it a deeply spiritual experience of freedom: the freedom that comes when we recognize that we are not the center of the universe.

This communal act of humility was so pleasant, refreshing, and renewing. And if there's one thing we know about being human from the bible, it's that we all need this experience, an experience of renewal. It is an essential part of our human condition, a gift of the Spirit which comes when we cultivate humble, prayerful and compassionate lives.

Which brings us to our scripture for today. The reading this morning call us, urges us, to present ourselves to God, as a living sacrifice, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can know the will of God, what is good, mature, and pleasurable.

The reading for today is from St. Paul's letter to the Church in Rome and it comes from the 12th chapter, near the end of Paul's epic letter where he lays out what becomes part of the foundational theology of the Christian tradition throughout the centuries.

A theology that holds at its very core the belief that God is grace, that God is unearned, unmerited love and forgiveness poured out in a self-emptying act for humanity and all creation.

A theology which believes that God's grace is ever-creating, sustaining, renewing, and redeeming all things. In Paul's letter, we hear loud and clear, it is through God's grace that we are saved, it is through God's grace that we are healed, it is through God's grace that we are made whole, by grace alone.

See, in the early Church there was this ongoing argument between different communities, about what is it that brings us Christ's salvation, is it grace or is it the law? Is it grace or our works?

Now you might be thinking to yourself, oh yeah right Robert, the early church never argued about anything. It was all peace, love and harmony, building the kingdom of God on earth. In the early church, there weren't things like egos or agendas, or people trying to one up each other.

Well, actually, as long as the church has been the church, it has been populated with people, and as long as people have been people we have been flawed, imperfect and ego-driven. The church has never had an idyllic time of Christian community, it has always been the way it is now.

For some of us this might sound like bad news because, well, we like to believe that there was a moment in time where we got it right and were able to live in picture-perfect community.

But, to me, the fact that the church has always been full of division, full of people being people, full of discussions and arguments and disagreements from the very beginning until now, to me, this is good news. A word of hope and encouragement because it shows the power of God's grace at work within us and through us and in spite of us, to build something that endures generation upon generation. To build something that is still imperfect and flawed, and yet beautiful, real and sacred, and in it all and through it all you can see the grace of God at work. God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God's insistent love binding us to one another over time.

Paul's letter to the Romans is a crucial and powerful part of this sacred and beautifully imperfect project that we call the church. And in this letter Paul is able to articulate a Christian theology of grace that continues to have a tremendous relevance for us as we discern for our lives and our context what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and mature. So let's unpack this portion of Romans just a little bit.

See back in the day, in Paul's world, people lived under this assumption and belief that your life was defined by what he called the law. Now when Paul is talking about the law it's important to point out that this was a general category which included the law of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the law of the Roman Empire.

Essentially living under the law meant that your life was determined by an underlying conditional existence, or to put it another way, your life was a constant set of if-then relationships.

If I do A, B, or C, then I will get X, Y, or Z.

This was the foundational aspect of what it meant to live under the law and it was considered to be the way to have a purpose-driven life.

This narrative was so pervasive in Paul's culture and time that he called this the way of the world.

Now, I don't think this has gone away. It still exists in our world and is as pervasive today as it was when Paul was writing Romans. We still live under this false notion that the purpose of our life is to work really hard, to earn all that we can, to one up everyone else in this world in some way manipulating our life circumstances in just the right way so that then, and only then, can we finally experience peace, wholeness, and joy.

We still find ourselves drifting into this if-then thinking which is living under the law.

Like, if I work really hard at being a moral person and manage the sin out of my life, then I will be worthy of salvation.

Or, if I lose 20 lbs. or get some new clothes, or a new haircut, or some Rogaine to work on that bald spot, then I will be worthy of love.

Or if I just had my neighbors' marriage or house or car or family, then I could finally be happy.

Or if I get just get that job or promotion or the respect I deserve, then my life will be perfect and I will finally have everything under control.

This is the way of the world that Paul is talking about, that part of our human condition which is always striving and trying our best to earn our way into the full and meaningful life we all hope for and desire.

The problem with this narrative is that it tells us to never be satisfied with what we have because there is always more to get. It tells us that we are never really supposed to be content with where we are at, because where we are at is never where we are supposed to be, because the grass is always, always, always greener on the other side.

It's a false narrative of a longed-for perfection that we desperately seek; feeling as if we just lived the way we should or if we just did life right, then we could get so much more from our existence.

In the end, it just leads us down the road of dissatisfaction and disappointment because we've got it backwards, we are trying to transform our lives from the outside in instead of the inside out.

Paul says, don't conform to this understanding of your life, don't conform to a narrative that says your life is rooted in a conditional existence, instead be transformed by the renewing of your mind by the unconditional love of God which is given to you in good measure. The grace of God which is enough, enough for you to just be who you are.

Paul says, now, just because of all this, don't start thinking too highly of yourself, because that's just a manifestation of the law of if-thens playing itself out, where you think you've somehow, by your work and effort, one up'd other people in this world.

Paul says resist this temptation to think too highly of yourself because it's too big a burden for you to bear, you're not that good, you can't be that perfect all the time and eventually if you are trusting too much in your own goodness and righteous moral superiority, well eventually something is going to give and it all will come crashing down.

Instead, Paul says, remember who you are, who you truly are in this world and start from that point and work your way out. He says remember that it is God who created you because God is unearned, overflowing, indiscriminate love poured out for you and all existence.

Remember that it is God who calls us back into loving relationship when we start to think that we can save ourselves through our good effort.

Remember it is God who loves us back to life when all things fail and crumble around us, when the picture-perfect vision for our life never comes into fulfillment.

It is in these very moments when grace rushes in and enfolds us and reminds us that we are accepted and loved by something greater and more beautifully sacred than we can ever imagine.

Paul invites us to remember that the spirit which called all things into being and set in motion the swirling planets and solar eclipses, the same spirit which came to be fully known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth who is all compassion and pure unbounded love made flesh, that this same spirit dwells within us at our sacred center. It is the image in which we were created, it is our true self and calls us back home anytime we lose our way. Paul says trust in this and in this story, trust in this to fill you up to the point of contentment, so that you can be set free from the narrative of the world which says you need to do more or be more or earn more to find your worth. Trust that God's love really is enough for you, and that you really are enough for God. Amen.