

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 27, 2023 – The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 12:1-8
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In this morning's passage from St. Paul's letter to the church in Rome we hear his familiar metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, a body with many members who have been given different gifts. We know from other passages in Paul's writing that his vision of this body was that all the members were to be guided by Christ as the head of all and that all the members were meant to use their gifts to work together for the common good, the wellbeing of the entire body.

Paul exhorts his readers not to "be conformed to this world." In other words, Christians are to live by other standards than the standards of the world. They are to live by the will of God, as Paul writes, by "what is good and acceptable and perfect." There is a decided contrast in Paul's thinking between the world and the will of God. He sometimes expressed this as a contrast between "flesh" and "spirit." It has been mistakenly understood that "flesh" means everything associated with the body. In the history of the church this understanding has led to very unfortunate attitudes toward the body. But if we turn to Paul's letter to the Galatians, our understanding of "flesh" can be broader and more accurate.

Paul wrote, "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh... Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these" (Galatians 5:16-21). Clearly, some of these "works" are bodily, but many are not. It is by no means the case that in Paul's thinking everything that we do with our bodies is condemned.

In the world today, as in the past, many of these "works of the flesh" are simply accepted as part of "the way of the world." Think for a moment about this. What are some of the assumptions about life in our secular society? "Looking out for number one." Grabbing – isn't it interesting how that word has become so common and acceptable today? – grabbing as much as possible of the world's "goods and services" regardless of the needs of others. Getting ahead. Paying attention to things that are external rather than what is inward – the heart, the soul. Stretching the truth or breaking with the truth entirely if doing so helps someone to get what they want when they want it. We could go on and on.

In contrast, Christians have the Spirit, and Paul identifies the fruit or consequences of living by the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). He urges the followers of Jesus to be transformed, changed, made new by God, all in the direction of living by the values of God rather than the world, all in the direction of living by the heart and mind of Christ.

In the passage we heard today Paul lists several gifts that church members are given by God's grace. He begins with an exhortation to the members of the community, one given to him

by God's grace: use sober judgment (that is, a sound mind) when thinking about the gifts God has given you. Do not "think of yourself more highly than you ought to think" is a call to humility before God. When we have an attitude of humility, we recognize that our gifts have come from God, the source of life and of all good gifts. We do not deny our gifts in a kind of false humility, for that would be a failure in gratitude to God for what God has given. But we are to assess our gifts – and the gifts of others – with right judgment.

Paul then names some of the gifts given to the members of the church. Some are easily understood; "the teacher, in teaching," for example, though we might add that the teacher must take care to teach what is true. Other gifts need a bit of explanation. Prophecy is not predicting the future. Prophecy refers to the present, and it means speaking in the church community the word – as from God – of exhortation, encouragement, or rebuke. "Ministry" means "serving," from the Greek word *diakonos*, from which we have the word "deacon." An "exhorter" is an "encourager," a *parakletos*. You will remember that in John's Gospel the Paraclete is a name for the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Paul names: "the compassionate, in cheerfulness." The word translated "compassionate" comes from the Greek verb which we know in our liturgy when we say "*kyrie eleison*," "Lord, have mercy." "Show mercy cheerfully." This doesn't mean that we're meant to be laughing when we offer our compassion to another person. It means that we are to be kind and gracious when we do so. In Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth he writes, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). This means a person who gives to those in need in a kindly or gracious way, not ungraciously or grudgingly. So, in this passage, one who shows mercy to another person should do so in a kindly, caring way, not in a punitive or condescending manner.

St. Paul challenges the followers of Jesus to examine the way we live our lives. What values guide us – are they the values of "the world" or "the Spirit"? We are called to take an honest look at ourselves, which can be an uncomfortable process. How do we live, day to day? How do we spend our money? How do we spend our time? What is our impact on the environment? How do we treat the strangers we meet in the bank, the store, and on the highway? How do we behave in our church community? How does our faith in God – Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit – inform us, not only as we worship here on Sunday mornings, but in every aspect of our lives? How do we use the gifts that our gracious God has given us?

Because we live in the world, it is difficult not to be conformed to the world. But Paul reminds us that God has offered us a different way to live. It is not an easy way, the way of being "a living sacrifice." But it is a way of life that holds out the promise of wonderful gifts – love, joy, and peace.

May God help each of us and all of us as a community of faith to be transformed and to discern the will of God, and to do what God has called us to do. In the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.