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Text: Romans 12:1-8 (9-21)

### Worship God with the Whole Body

I have something that I treasure very highly – and will treasure for the rest of my life. It is an envelope containing 8 letters that I received ten years ago, on May 31, 2009. Here are some of the highlights of the letters. Annelle gave me a picture of 5 children and invited me to get to know them better. Maya told me about the church and asked me questions about myself. Luke described his favorite activities and told me about his family. Cedar shared his plans for the future and offered to help me if needed. Tasha listed all of her pets and asked me to write her back. Jacob raved about church potlucks and drew a picture of the church with my name on the sign. Kristin informed me that all of the kids in this church are great. Lois welcomed me as pastor of this church and promised to support me in this new job.

All of these letters are interesting and informative. Occasionally I pull them out and reread them. They made me feel welcome and motivated me to do something like this for someone else. They told me about this church as a whole and about some of the individual people in it

In some respects, they remind me of the New Testament epistles. These epistles – we more commonly call them letters – were written by different authors in a variety of settings about diverse issues. We find these letters in the Bible after the 4 gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that focus on the life of Jesus and after the book of Acts that tells about the first Christians and Paul's missionary journeys. They are written to Christians in places that are mentioned in the book of Acts. Like the letters I received ten years ago, these letters contain greetings, information, encouragement, introductions, exhortations, and requests.

Virtually all Bible scholars agree that the Apostle Paul wrote Romans. This is not the case for some of the other letters in the New Testament. In contrast to most of the other letters he wrote, Paul does not write to the Roman churches in response to a crisis in the community. He had not established the churches in Rome; in fact, he had not yet even visited them.

In this letter Paul writes to the Romans to explain his understanding of the gospel and to tell them about his evangelistic work. He hopes to visit Rome after he travels to Jerusalem to deliver money he had been collecting from the congregations he had founded in the Gentile world. I think he would also be willing to accept financial support from the churches in Rome for a mission trip he is planning to Spain – so, actually, this could be thought of as a fundraising letter.<sup>1</sup> As a result, we have the benefit of reading Paul's carefully stated thoughts about theology (what to believe) and ethics (how to act) without dealing with an enclosed pledge form.

Paul begins chapter 12 with a call to righteousness: *Brothers and sisters, in light of all I have shared with you about God's mercies, I urge you to offer your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice to God, a sacred offering that brings God pleasure; this is your reasonable, essential worship. Do not allow this world to mold you in its own image. Instead, be transformed from the inside out by renewing your mind. As a result, you will be able to discern what God wills and whatever God finds good, pleasing, and complete.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 15:22-29

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:1-2, *The Voice*.

For us, these verses may be familiar. It's likely we've heard sermons about sacrificial living, worship, not conforming to the world around us, and being transformed into better – or, at least, different – people. However, for the Roman Christians, these ideas would have been quite startling. No matter what religion they had practiced before deciding to follow Christ, they would have been familiar with the idea of sacrifice. But the sacrifices offered would have been grain or some kind of animal like a goat or a bird. Perhaps there would have been some money involved. So when Paul brings up the idea of offering their own bodies as living sacrifices, it would have sounded odd to them.

For most of the Romans, the notion that the body was involved in worship at all would have seemed strange. They believed that religion only involved the spirit, and what a person did with their body didn't matter much, if at all. And then, Paul includes the mind as well as the body. It's obvious that he had a comprehensive understanding of the body that includes flesh, soul, mind, and spirit. But, of course, this echoes Jesus' response to the question "Which commandment is the greatest of all?" His answer was "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus had a comprehensive understanding of what it meant to love and worship God. Loving God involves every part of a person's life – not only how one thinks and believes, but also how one lives and acts. A person's relationship with God affects all other relationships. It affects how a person looks at the world. It affects how a person understands themselves.<sup>4</sup> It makes a difference every day, not just on Sunday morning.

After Paul tells the Romans they are to worship God with their entire body, he expands the definition of the word "body."

*Because of the grace allotted to me, I can respectfully tell you not to think of yourselves as being more important than you are; devote your minds to sound judgment since God has assigned to each of us a measure of faith. For in the same way that one body has so many different parts, each with different functions; we, too—the many—are different parts that form one body in [Christ] the Anointed One. Each one of us is joined with one another, and we become together what we could not be alone. Since our gifts vary depending on the grace poured out on each of us, it is important that we exercise the gifts we have been given. If prophecy is your gift, then speak as a prophet according to your proportion of faith. If service is your gift, then serve well. If teaching is your gift, then teach well. If you have been given a voice of encouragement, then use it often. If giving is your gift, then be generous. If leading, then be eager to get started. If sharing God's mercy, then be cheerful in sharing it.<sup>5</sup>*

The body metaphor is a favorite of Paul's. He uses it in his letters to the Ephesians and the Corinthians as well as in this one to the Romans. Referring to a community as a body was a common metaphor at that time. A community or a city was compared with the human body to encourage cooperation and unity.<sup>6</sup>

However, once again, Paul gives it an unusual twist. Instead of using the analogy to keep subordinates in their places, which would have been the more common usage, he urges the readers to not think too highly of themselves – the "more privileged members of the community

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:30, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>4</sup> John E. Toews, *Romans*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, ed. Elmer A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 297.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 12:3-8, *The Voice*.

<sup>6</sup> Toews, 303.

[are] to respect and value the contributions of those members who appear to be their inferiors, both in social status and in spiritual potency.”<sup>7</sup>

Paul uses the body metaphor in these verses to introduce three important characteristics of the Christian community. Unity – there are many members, but there is one body in Christ. Diversity—members have different functions. Interdependence—the individual members of the body are connected to each other. Paul says they are “members one of another.” Each person is connected not only to Christ, but also to every other person within the body. Each one of us is joined with one another, and we become together what we could not be alone.

Paul’s list of seven gifts given to the body includes gifts that could be associated with a person holding an “office” or official position of authority in the church. The list also includes gifts not limited to official positions. The point of the metaphor is that the sum is greater than the parts. All parts are important and needed for the well-being of the whole. No part should think arrogantly about its importance or role. Churches are composed of interdependent people.<sup>8</sup>

It is appropriate that the body metaphor section in Romans 12 leads into an exhortation to love and honor one another.

*Love others well, and don’t hide behind a mask; love authentically. Despise evil; pursue what is good as if your life depends on it. Live in true devotion to one another, loving each other as sisters and brothers. Be first to honor others by putting them first. Do not slack in your faithfulness and hard work. Let your spirit be on fire, bubbling up and boiling over, as you serve the Lord. Do not forget to rejoice, for hope is always just around the corner. Hold up through the hard times that are coming, and devote yourselves to prayer. Share what you have with the saints, so they lack nothing; take every opportunity to open your life and home to others.*<sup>9</sup>

The different gifts given to everyone by God are to be recognized, valued, and used with love for the common good. This dynamic interdependence impacts individuals, congregations, and the church as a whole. The interdependence of the body calls Christians – it calls us, as individuals and as a group, to accept and use our gifts from God for the common good. It calls us to recognize and encourage the God-given gifts in other people. It means walking in love with one another.

One author, Ronald Rolheiser, refers to this as being God with skin on; to be God’s physical hands, feet, voice, and heart on this earth.<sup>10</sup> Being the body of Christ to each other involves participation and physical presence. Prayer includes concrete action. Pray for the sick and also take them to the doctor. Pray for the sad and lonely and also call or visit them. Pray for peace and also forgive the one who hurts you.<sup>11</sup>

The interdependence of the body calls for participation in a community of believers, in a congregation; no body part can maintain vibrancy apart from the other parts of the body. Common life in the congregation “demands that there be some real sharing of life together, that we pray together; that we celebrate our rites of passage together; that we celebrate some of our everyday joys, fears, and feasts together; that we are responsible to each other and open to each other as regards mutual correction and challenge; that we are responsible together for the

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<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James L. May, Patrick D. Miller and Paul J. Achtemeier (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 213.

<sup>8</sup> Toews, 304.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 12:9-13, *The Voice*.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 80.

<sup>11</sup> Rolheiser, 83-84.

ministry of the church; and that we have some common sharing of finances in support of our local church and its projects.”<sup>12</sup>

The interdependence of the body asks a congregation to work with other congregations and a denomination to work with other denominations.

During my decade as pastor of Salina Mennonite Church, I have observed the diversity, unity, and interdependence that Paul is talking about in this passage. In this congregation, there is diversity – a variety of personalities, backgrounds, ages, abilities, and jobs. In this congregation, there is unity – people who have a common faith in Christ, who are working together in one church. And in this congregation, there is interdependence – people who share their lives with each other, pray for each other, and feast with each other. I have personally experienced the gifts of hospitality, service, compassion, generosity, leadership, and teaching that are present in this congregation.

I have also experienced the vulnerability that comes with this interdependence. It is often harder to accept help from others than to give it. This interdependence means that you know more about me than I might have wanted you to know. You’ve seen my weaknesses and vulnerabilities. You’ve been patient with me and forgiven me when I’ve made mistakes. You’ve lifted me up when I’ve been overwhelmed and sad. You’ve also allowed me to be present and walk with you in your difficult moments, as well as in your celebrations. Paul tells us that this kind of interdependence is good. It is necessary. It is part of worship.

I don’t know if any of you noticed that, except for a few edits, this sermon on Romans 12 is the same one I preached on my first Sunday as pastor of Salina Mennonite Church. I am thankful to God and to this congregation that through all the changes that have happened in the past decade – for the better and for the worse – we have continued to live into our call and our mission to be the body of Christ in this place, seeking to share God’s love through celebration, nurture, service, and peacemaking.

Our task as people of faith is to worship God with our entire individual body – heart, mind, soul, and strength. We are also to worship God with our entire body as a community of Christ – a body that is diverse, unified, and interdependent. This worship happens not only on Sunday morning but all through the week. It is characterized not only by what we believe – by our theology, but also by what we do – by our ethics. Through this worship, we are more able each day to discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

God is present with us and will guide us as we use our gifts, recognize the giftedness of others, love others, put his love into action, and participate in the body. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>12</sup> Rolheiser, 121.