

You Are Needed!

Rally Day, September 8, 2019
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Romans 12:1-8

Today is Rally Day! Although Rally Day isn't recognized as an official church holiday, it has come to represent a new beginning for many Christian churches. It's a time when we return from our summer's rest to a more consistent rhythm of life. It's a time when we celebrate coming together again. We're filled with joy at our reunion with those we've missed. We're excited by the introduction of new friends. We give out Bibles and bless backpacks as students begin or return to school. And we always eat well on Rally Day at Federated Church.

As we celebrate these many blessings in our lives, it's good for us to consider *our* place in this Body...the Body of Christ at Federated Church. We're drawn to *this* place and to *these* people. We *want* to be a part of this community, to belong, to know that our presence is important. We want to be part of something *bigger* than ourselves, something that *transcends* our lives as individuals. We not only feel God's love here, but we see God's love being lived out in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We *know* that there's love in this community.

But how do we live in such a way that we share in the ministries of this faith family with the larger community? How do we walk in this world in a way that reassures us and the *rest* of the world that God's love is *real*, that God's love reaches *beyond* the boundaries we construct, that God's love is *without* limits?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul spends several chapters explaining that God's love and righteousness are a result of God's grace given to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. He describes a new life in Jesus Christ that rises above sin and gives all people the freedom to live in the knowledge of the love of God. Paul describes how God calls us to live in the world.

Unfortunately, Paul's instructions can feel overwhelming. It can feel like this new life is unattainable. It can feel like Paul is asking us to live out a kind of perfection that will surely result in our failure. So, what do we do with this appeal from Paul?

One of the challenging parts of today's scripture is when Paul asks us to present our bodies as a "*living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*" This always sounds a bit scary to me. How many of us look in the mirror and say "Wow, my body is so great that it's holy and acceptable?" I'm guessing not many of us think that. We don't tend to think of our bodies in such spiritual terms. We look at what's wrong with our bodies, all its imperfections. We focus on what our bodies can't do, how they're limited.

But Paul urges us to remember that these bodies are God's *creation*. They are created for *worship* and for *service*. The very God who created the universe created *our* bodies. Our body is the most basic place at which we connect with God. It's where our joys live and where our pain is felt. These bodies are surely made for nothing less than spiritual worship. We may not always treat them that way, but our bodies allow us to do God's work while we're here on this earth. No matter what shape our bodies are in or how well they do or don't function, they are the means through which we share God's love with the world.

Paul uses even more anxiety-provoking language when he says that we are to "*discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" We may be all right with "good" and "acceptable," but most of us tense up a little at the word "perfect." Although we *can* become obsessed with perfection, most of us doubt our ability to discern God's will "perfectly." But that's not the kind of perfection Paul is asking us to attain.

Hear Paul again" he's not saying that *our* discernment of God's will should be "perfect." He's saying that *God's will* is "good and acceptable and perfect." No one's asking perfection of us. God's already got that covered. We're merely asked to use our bodies and our minds to *understand* God's will as best we can.

Which still sounds like a tall order! Who am I to discern God's "good and acceptable and perfect" will? Luckily for us, Paul doesn't leave us hanging! Paul declares that, by God's grace, we all receive gifts of the Spirit. These gifts aren't things we earn or deserve. They're not our gifts to hoard. God's "good and acceptable and perfect will" determined that these gifts are needed in the Body of Christ, in this community, in the world. Which means *you* are needed in the world. *I* am needed in the world. Every

one of us is *needed* by this world. God created each of us because we are *necessary* parts of God's will, serving God's purpose.

So, what are *your* spiritual gifts? What gift did God give to you that is so needed by the world? Sometimes our gifts are clearly revealed to us and we know what they are and how to apply them. But what if we don't know what our gifts are? What if we're a little afraid we don't have any gifts to offer? Paul assures us that we all have at least one spiritual gift and he encourages us to seek out and apply that gift to meet some need in the world. (If you're not sure what your gift is, consider taking my "Breathing with God" course which is designed to help discern and employ spiritual gifts!)

Paul reminds us that we have God's Holy Spirit with us to guide us and encourage us in our ministry. Scripture tells us that God's Spirit, given at Pentecost, will never leave us. It is the part of God which lives in us and helps us discern our part in God's great mission. Your ministry may be one of the ministries Paul identifies here: speaking truth; serving people; teaching; encouraging others; giving generously; visioning and leading; or caring for those in need. Maybe your ministry is something entirely new! There are limitless possibilities for ministry because the needs of the world are infinite.

The Christian writer Frederick Buechner wrote: ""The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The *place God calls you to* is your ministry. You experience *deep gladness* when you successfully employ your spiritual gift. The *world's deep hunger* is some need that God created you to meet. When you effectively employ your spiritual gift on behalf of the world, you are performing the ministry for which God created you.

Paul also points out that we are *not* alone in our ministry. As part of the body of Christ, we don't bear the burden of identifying our gifts or discerning how to use them by ourselves. We belong to a community of faith which loves one another, cares for one another, looks out for one another. We journey with faithful Christians along the same spiritual path and they help us to figure out what our gifts are and how to use them. When we discover and use our gifts, we are affirmed by the community.

Paul uses the analogy of the body to expound on using our spiritual gifts. Each part of the body has a function, but no two functions are the same. Yet, it requires all the parts of the body, performing their unique function, to ensure the proper health and operation of the body. The Body of Christ – the Church – needs all of us working together to function effectively and to meet the various needs of our community.

What Paul's message really boils down to is this: You are needed! Without your spiritual gift, our ministry at Federated Church is incomplete. Without your participation, our church's effectiveness is diminished. Without your contribution, our congregation's impact in the community is weakened. It takes all of us, working together for God, to accomplish the task God calls us to: sharing the life-giving love of Jesus with the world.

Today, as we enjoy one another's company and share a meal, we will also share our ministries with one another. We will have the chance to glimpse how others at Federated Church are using their gifts to follow Jesus. You may find a ministry that fits you. Or you may be inspired to start a ministry that isn't represented today. Or you may be ministering to people in a less structured, but just as necessary way. Our whole ministry is about sharing our God-given gifts with others, and there's no limit to the ministries in God's Kingdom.

So, Paul is not really telling us how we *must* live. Paul is writing about how we should *want* to live when we recognize the great love and mercy of God. This is what it means to be a follower of Christ. *We* don't have to be "good and acceptable and perfect." *God* is. These are the great gifts and mercies of God. In response to this grace, we use our God-given gifts to love and serve one another and the world.

Prayer: Empowering God, do not let us neglect Your Spirit or the gifts You give us. Give us courage to use these gifts and the humility to use them for the benefit of others and for Your glory. Help us see the good work You have ready for us and to embrace that work with willingness and joy. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Source: The Rev. Dr. Jill Walters, "You Are Needed!" August 27, 2017.

<http://standrewsamarrillo.org/connect/sermons/you-are-needed-sermon-for-the-12th-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a/> (Site visited August 14, 2019).