

ROMANS - LIVING SACRIFICES
A SERMON BASED ON ROMANS 12:1-21
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, AUGUST 25, 2019
10:00 a.m.

It is easier to be with people who are like you.

Shared interests.

Shared stories.

Shared faith.

Shared ideologies.

It is easier to like people who agree with us.

We can find them validating and both affirming, and confirming.

Different is not as easy.

Different interests.

Different stories.

Different faiths.

Different ideologies.

It is harder to like people who disagree with us.

It is easier to reject them.

Dismiss them.

Stay away from them.

We can find them challenging, threatening, and unnerving.

The early church had a problem.

All kinds of people were becoming Christians.

All kinds of people were putting their trust in Jesus.

They were different from one another.

Vastly different.

Rich, and poor, Greeks, Romans and Jews,

slaves and free, women and men.

An Ethiopian eunuch, the Chief Financial Officer

for Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians had even become a Christian.

There are typically compartments for all these people in society.

Everyone knew where they belonged and who they were.

But with Jesus,

the walls had come down.

Everyone was getting in, and the early church
was trying to figure out how this was going to work,

Rich and poor, Greeks and Jews, slaves and free,

men and women,

all of the world showing up for worship together.

What we read in Romans 12 today, comes right on the heels of Paul

spending chapters 9, 10 and 11

articulating and explaining the status of the people of Israel

in light of the teaching and faith in Jesus.

It is faith-identity writing and there was anxiety.

But Paul wants followers of Jesus to reach up

and above giving people labels.

He says, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world.

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.

Think of yourself with sober judgement.

Just as each of us has one body with many members,

and these members do not all have the same function,

so in Christ we,

though many,

form one body,

and each member belongs to all the others.

You are not separate because of your difference.

Each belongs to all the others.

In the movie adaptation of Tolkien's trilogy

the Lord of the Rings,

there is a point in the movie where Frodo Baggins,

a short creature of humble stature and simple pleasures

called a hobbit,

offers to undertake a terrifying mission;

to carry The One Ring of Sauron,

a ring of tremendous power for evil that is a threat to the world.

Frodo offers to carry the ring,

on an epic quest through massive peril

to the Cracks of Mount Doom in Mordor

in order to destroy it.

Frodo is a humble hobbit.

In a world of wizards, and elves and dwarves and men

a hobbit wouldn't in any way appear to have the wits,

the strength,

or the endurance to make such a journey.

But Frodo has a willing spirit and an open heart.

In the movie, as a council is underway
as the powerful and resourced try to determine

what could be done with the ring,
and who has the skill, fortitude and ability to handle it,
Frodo steps forward.

“I will take it. I will take it. I will take the ring to Mordor...
though, I do not know the way.”

They are shocked, slightly chagrined, and yet encouraged.

Gandalf, the mighty wizard says to him,

‘I will help you bear this burden, Frodo Baggins,
as long as it is yours to bear.

Aragorn, the noble king of men says to him,

‘If by my life or my death, I can protect you, I will.

You have my sword.’

Legolas the elf says,

‘And my bow’

Gimli the dwarf,

‘And my axe’

Frodo’s best friend Sam, another hobbit,

uninvited to this secret council,

but who has clearly been eavesdropping,

jumps forward,

seemingly out of nowhere.

‘Mr. Frodo’s not going anywhere without me!’

To which the elven chair of the council says,

‘No indeed, it is hardly possible to separate you,

even when he is summoned to a secret council

and you are not.’

At which point two other hobbits,

two more of Frodo’s friends Merry and Pippin appear,

‘Wait! We’re coming too.’

The chair of the council said,

‘Nine companions. So be it. You shall be called,

The Fellowship of the Ring.'

To which the hobbit Pippin says, 'Great! Where are we going?'

Four hobbits, a wizard, two men, a dwarf and an elf.

The differences between them couldn't be more vast.

So to hear words of unconditional support that reach beyond labels.

To hear the promise of loyalty to the death.

To watch a fellowship emerge where none existed before.

It is a moving scene.

It is powerful to witness.

It is something we somehow instinctively crave and know to be good.

But something we believe has become near impossible

in this age of increasing shrill voices.

Hurt and disappointed with people,

categorized and labelled

we come to believe fellowship is something of fantasy

accessible only in fantasy writing

something for elves and dwarves and hobbits.

And so when the church is described as a fellowship,
sometimes we can't seem to come up with a vision
any more credible or inspiring
than coffee in the foyer after worship,
or if you want to go big, a potluck.

But we are a fellowship.

We have undertaken a journey.

Great!! Where are we going? the hobbits asked.

Author Larry Crabb writes,

“The church is a community on a journey to God.”

He further writes “the formation of community

is the intricate, patient, painful work of the Holy Spirit.”

Which sounds so pure, ideal and noble.

However, these statements are in his chapter titled,

‘For God’s Sake, Don’t Expect It To Be Easy’

So in Romans 12 Paul writes for us how it is done

as the church starts out on its journey of fellowship.

He says,

Each of you belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts. Do what you can.

If your gift is prophesying. Do that.

If it is serving. Then serve.

If it is teaching. Then teach.

If it is encouraging. Then encourage.

If it is giving. Then give. Generously

If it is leading. Then lead. Diligently

If it showing mercy. Do it cheerfully.

Do what you can.

Overcome evil with good.

Be devoted to each other in love.

Bless those who persecute you.

Live in harmony with another.

Do not be proud.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,

live at peace with everyone.

Do what you can.

We look around the pews and ask is this our fellowship?

We have coffee in the foyer maybe, cake sometimes,
and to be honest, even that can feel awkward.

But people who are willing to journey with me,
to help me carry the ring, and in God's name,
push back against evil in the world
bringing good to the world with me
on a journey to God?
Is this the fellowship?

I am here to tell you this morning,

Yes, this is indeed the fellowship.

It is the church. Romans 12.

We have a lot of different backgrounds, experiences, stories
perspectives and abilities in this room.

To be honest, I'm kind of proud of how different we all are.

But different is harder than same.

So Paul writing to a church where everyone is showing up, says,

“So don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought.

These are your people.

Love must be sincere.

Honour one another above yourselves.

Be joyful in hope,

patient in affliction,

faithful in prayer.

Share with the Lord’s people who are in need.

Practice hospitality.”

These are your people.

Do what you can.

C.S. Lewis’ book the Screwtape Letters,

is a fun fictional account

of one demon working in the bureaucracy of hell

He is named Screwtape.

He’s the supervising manager,

writing and coaching his staff demon Wormwood,

who has been assigned to a human,

which they refer to as his patient.

Unfortunately for Wormwood,
his patient, his human has become a Christian.

As such,

his patient has started going to church.

There is some cause for concern,

for Wormwood's patient would become part of the fellowship.

Screwtape tells Wormwood not to worry

and gives him advice on how to direct his human.

“When he gets to his pew, and looks round him

he sees just that selection of his neighbours

whom he has up til now avoided.

You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours.

Make his mind flit to and fro between ‘the body of Christ’

and the actual faces in the next pew.

It matters very little of course,

what kind of people that next pew really contains.

You may know them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side.

No matter.

Your patient, thanks to our Father Below, is a fool.

Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune,

or have shoes that squeak,

or double chins, or odd clothes,

the patient will quite easily believe

that their religion must therefore

be somehow ridiculous.

Work hard then on the disappointment or anticlimax

which is certainly coming to the patient

during his first few weeks at church.”

Bonhoeffer, in his book on the church fellowship

called *Life Together* names the same experience,

pointing out how a community can lose its vision,

simply because it lacks a realistic picture of itself.

He writes,

‘Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down

because it had sprung from a wish dream.

The serious Christian, set down for the first time

in a Christian community,
is likely to bring with him a very definite idea
of what Christian life together should be,
and try to realize it.

But God's grace

speedily shatters such dreams.

Just as surely as God desires to lead us

to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship,

so surely must we be overwhelmed

by a great disillusionment with others,

with Christians in general, and,

if we are fortunate, with ourselves.

Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment,

with all its unhappy and ugly aspects,

begins to be what it should be in God's sight,

begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it.

The sooner this shock of disillusionment
comes to an individual and to a community,
the better for both.

A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis,
which insists upon keeping its illusion
when it should be shattered,
permanently loses in that moment
the promise of Christian community.”

He who loves the dream of community
more than the Christian community itself,
becomes its destroyer.”

We look around the pews and ask

is this the fellowship?

Coffee and banana bread maybe.

But are these the people who are willing to journey with me,

to carry the One Ring,

Is this the fellowship?

This is indeed the fellowship.

And that is the call upon us.

To indeed be disillusioned.

To remove the illusion of having perfect lives,

of presenting ourselves

as people who have it all together.

Who are disillusioned, and make the journey anyway.

It's the fellowship of the church.

The fellowship stands with you.

And you are called to stand with the fellowship.

Do what you can.

In light of what God's done for you,

in view of God's mercy,

offer yourselves as a living sacrifice,

holy and pleasing to God.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world.

Reach higher, be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Romans chapter 12 tells us,

we who are many form one body,
and each member belongs to all the others.

The rest of the chapter just tells you how to make it real,
and how to do it.

You were formed for God's family.

You were formed for the fellowship.

We are so much more than just coffee and banana bread.

We are the fellowship.

Making the journey to God together.

Helping one another get there.

We are the fellowship.

In Christ, we, though many, form one body
and each of us belongs to all the others.

Do what you can.

Amen