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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16A)

August 24, 2014

Text: Romans 11:33–12:8

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In preparing for today's message, I initially thought the selection from Romans 11 and 12 to be a bit awkward. The beginning of today's reading, Romans 11:33–36, is really the conclusion to chapters 9–11. Those three chapters really dealt with the question of how can God be considered faithful in fulfilling His promises when Israel, God's chosen people, have rejected the Christ, the Lord Jesus. Over the past three weeks we've worked through the apostle Paul's teaching. It culminated last week with Paul's greatest and yet most perplexing, counterintuitive, amazing conclusion.

In short, the God the Father has not rejected His chosen people but instead has placed all people, Jew and Gentile alike, under the judgment of disobedience (Rom 11:32). This God has done for the purpose of having mercy not only upon Israel but all people, the whole world, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In order to bring that divine mercy to the world, the Lord is using the Gentiles, the non-Jews, who in turn bring that Good News of God's love and faithfulness back to the Jews! All disobedient men, women, and children, Jew and Gentile alike, are rejected so that they might be accepted. Everyone stands condemned so that everyone might be saved.

That universal grace and that radical, unexpected plan of divine love and mercy is what prompts Paul to conclude with rapturous praise,

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (11:33–36).

We must always remember that the source of all true worship and praise is the glad reception of God's gifts received by grace, through faith, on account of Christ. This service today is founded upon that very promise established in His holy Word: God the Holy Trinity comes to us today, for you and for me, to enrich us with His grace, mercy, love, joy, peace, forgiveness, and the renewal of heart, soul, and body. And

these gifts we receive in faith with thanksgiving and praise made all the more joyous and beautiful through poetic words, musical harmonies, reverent rituals, and corporate devotion. “To him be glory forever. Amen.”!!

With this glorious moment of praise ringing in our ears, we come to chapter 12. This is a major new section in Romans though everything from chapter 12 to the end is built and predicated upon chapters 1–11. Paul begins to answer the “now what” question. How are we Christians to live knowing that we are saved by the power of Christ’s Gospel as described and explained in chapters 1–11? You might call chapter 12 the beginning of the practical, how to live section of this letter. But you can’t answer the “how shall we then live” question without knowing what it is that we believe, teach, and confess. Vs. 1, “I appeal to you therefore (the therefore means, “because of everything I just wrote...”), brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Notice something here right at the beginning. Paul’s appeal to Christian living is made under the umbrella of mercy and grace, “by the mercies of God” and not by the merits of the Christian. Christian living is not meritorious living, as if now that we’re Christians we can forget all that mercy and forgiveness business about Christ’s death and resurrection. As if we can now stand righteous and well-pleasing to God through our own works and merits. Perish that damnable thought! Christian living is all about mercy-living, living by the mercies of God.

When you leave this place of worship today, you do so under the mercies of God. When you go back to work tomorrow, you do so under the mercies of God. When you go on vacation, you do so under the mercies of God. When you watch TV, check Facebook, cheer for your favorite sports teams, give of your time, talents and resources to friends, family, and neighbors, when you do whatever it is you do, you do so under the mercies of God. All the good things Jesus did on Good Friday and Easter covers everything you do in heart, mind, body, and soul!

That’s what it means to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice. We too easily fall into the mistaken notion that Christian worship is only for Sundays and only a matter of the spirit. Perish the thought. We worship God each and every day under the mercies of God with our bodies. I want you to pinch yourself (not your neighbor!) and think about that real, flesh and blood body God has given you. You know all its strengths and weaknesses, all its foibles and eccentricities, its desires and cravings, that body that

you feed and nourish and pamper, and so often take for granted, is the location of Christian daily devotion.

That kind of enfleshed Christian living is your spiritual worship! That kind of “by the mercies of God” living is what God considers holy and acceptable. You are living sacrifices. Now that’s a new concept even for the Biblical witness. In the OT, animal sacrifices were offered in atonement for one’s sins. But the sacrifice died. Not so for you. You are a living sacrifice because you are united to Jesus, the sacrificed Lamb of God, who rose from the dead on the third day. The Lord Jesus is the living Lord and no other atoning sacrifice for sin is necessary. So your life is a living sacrifice of thanksgiving, joyous praise, daily obedience and devotion under the mercies of God.

Thus far, I’ve focused only on the “bodily” aspect of Christian living (vs. 1). But Christian living also requires Christian thinking. Consider vs. 2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Christian thinking requires repentance, a change of thinking. We used to think about life, family, marriage, money, sex, recreation, ethics, entertainment, morality, taxes, and government in ways that conformed to the nature of the world. But no longer. All areas of thinking are brought captive to the Lord Jesus Christ.

You must know, saints of God, that the world – here the “the world” refers to every way of thinking and living, to every institution or cultural practice that does not conform itself to God’s rule and reign – does not care about the things of God. In fact, it is hostile to the things of God and would corrupt your living and your thinking. But our lives are to be ones of constant discernment and evaluation so as to know what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

You see, true, authentic Christian living is a 24/7, heart, mind, body, and soul kind of life lived under the mercies of God in Christ Jesus. With that kind of all-embracing confession of faith, you can see why Paul spent 11 chapters explaining what it is we believe as Christians. You cannot live and think Christianly without being Christian, without knowing that you are justified, baptized and made new in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. You can’t live under the mercies of God until you’ve received the mercy of God in faith unto eternal salvation.

I want to close this sermon with an appeal which might actually serve as a warning. The apostle Paul encourages us not to be “conformed to this world” (vs. 2) but to live

as Christians in body and mind under the mercies of God. The warning is that our culture, our moment in history, does not encourage or sanction such living. Christians in America have generally expected our society to promote or at least not stand against Christian morality and ethics. This is no longer the case. And I warn you today, that to live under the mercies of God in body and soul with a godly mind transformed according to God's will and purposes, will become increasingly difficult.

I only briefly exemplify what I mean. The 1st Amendment to the US Constitution begins by stating, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." The non-establishment clause is generally honored. It's the free exercise clause that is under attack. If you listen closely to politicians and other leaders, they do not typically talk about the freedom to exercise one's religion as 24/7 kind of freedom. Instead, they talk about the freedom of worship. Increasingly, what this means is that governmental leaders and regulators see people as having the freedom to gather for worship but not the freedom to exercise their faith in every area of life.

Believe and teach whatever you want in your houses of worship, but leave it there. Don't take it to work, school, shopping, or to any public sector of society. Examples of such thinking are numerous but include: the requirement that businesses must provide services and benefits that are contrary to one's established faith, that Christian ideals are mocked and disdained at every level of education but most especially in colleges and universities, that popular entertainment actively undermines Christian morality, etc. This is not a politically motivated statement aimed at any particular administration. This erosion of religious liberty has taken place over decades under Republican and Democratic Presidents, under sessions of Congress led, at different times by both parties, and with Supreme Courts considered to both liberal and conservative in orientation.

I offer this brief warning so as to alert you. Life in Christ is full and free but that does not mean that it's always welcomed. The Lord Jesus, however, has overcome the world and its hostility. And do not be afraid. The Christian Church has lived and prospered long before there was a 1st Amendment. Remember where we began...with Paul's words of glorious praise. We shall end with them as well, "For form him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.