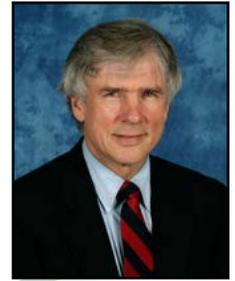




Hear the Word

from Pastor Timothy T. Weber



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 27, 2017

Does the Pretty Bird Sing?

Romans 12:1-2

The other day I was talking with two teenagers about how they were looking forward to grandma's upcoming visit while their parents were away. They were eagerly anticipating her arrival, happy about it, enjoyed her...but then they added, "sometimes you can get too much grandma." Sweetness can turn tough. One of the summer slogans for some people is "fish and relatives smell after three days." We all have our limits, generally preferring low maintenance relationships that offer enough but demand little. People like low maintenance marriages, but run when the cost starts mounting.

The church may be no exception to this principle. Convenient loving is one thing, but inconvenient love, love pushing our limits, is quite another thing. However, it's at the heart of the cross—costly love, not cheap love....daring love, not dainty love. In our second lesson from Romans 12, St. Paul does not hesitate in unpacking obligations, commands, imperatives that are unleashed in the lives of those who are Christ's new creations. Paul writes, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." That word "sacrifice." Dietrich Bonhoeffer echoes this demand in his book, The Cost of Discipleship, when he writes, "When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die." That word "die." Bonhoeffer contrasted "costly grace" with what he called "cheap grace", good news that simply comforts, but fails to engage us in the sacrificial life.

We hear "God loves you just as you are." That is true, but it is dangerously incomplete. It's like looking at a pretty bird that doesn't sing a song. God's love is not quiet. It does not allow us to stay where we are. God's unending love meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us. God's love is not a fixed picture, but is a videotape, always in motion—taking us and twisting and turning and transforming us over and over, shaping us into the adventure of God's people. When captured by God's love, it is helpful to remember what Joseph Campbell once said, "We must be willing to let go of the life we planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us." God's love is a dynamic summons into an adventure that awaits us, beyond what we could have imagined. It has been said that God loves us as we are, but loves us too much to leave us that way. We pretty birds, touched by God, are summoned to spring forth and sing and sing again. St. Paul writes in Romans, "I appeal to you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice." This is the core engine and central identity in the Christian life—the mercies of God unleashing our sacrificial living. This is mercy in motion.

Why does Paul say "present your body as a living sacrifice"? An interesting sidenote: Do you know that the Pelikan bird since ancient times has been a symbol of the sacrificial Christ. The Pelikan is

often seen in Christian art on church altars developed over the centuries, as in the Durham Cathedral in England, depicting a mother Pelikan poking her chest with her beak and giving her blood to her young chicks based on an earlier legend of a mother saving her babies from starvation. Writers like Dante and Shakespeare referred to the Pelikan's sacrifice in referencing the sacrifice of Christ. And there are many other references and art which lift up the Pelikan as the model for sacrificial living. The red beak looking like blood and the white feathers of the Pelikan probably assisted the development of the legend.

So, when Paul refers to presenting your "body", he means the visceral, earthy, flesh and blood commitment. But "body" doesn't simply mean our physical body. In the Greek, "body" represents the full self, the physical self, the emotional self, the mental self—all of us. Our complete self is being called out here—every part of us is being summoned to be a "living sacrifice." No part of the self is left behind. But in reality, we really resist this and want to offer only what is convenient, holding precious things back from God's claiming eye as if we could. Forgiveness is a nice idea, but it's people I have a hard time forgiving. Luther once said "three conversions are necessary: the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind, and the conversion of the purse. Of these three, the conversion of the purse is the most difficult." What part of your life are you holding back from God's claim on you?

We recently traveled through Europe and spent some time in the concentration camps of WWII, and in cities like Prague, Vienna, and Budapest oppressed by brutality of the Nazis and the terror of Communism. Museums and memorials give witness to countless stories of suffering and fear, persecution and executions, starvation and unspeakable wounds of the heart and body, families torn asunder never to see each other again. These kinds of atrocities abound in our world today. The memorial at the death camp at Maunthausen in Austria says "Let the living learn from the dead." In spite of many voices after WWII that shouted for all this evidence to be torn down and destroyed, these structures remained as witnesses for us all, as reminders of intolerable suffering, but also reminders of wondrous sacrifices. So many sacrificed their convenient comfort for inconvenient love and the costs of loving that way.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who I mentioned earlier, was studying in the United States in the 1930s when the Nazi forces mushroomed and plowed through Europe. And as the stories of suffering, domination, fear, burnings, occupations reached Bonhoeffer, his heart was torn. His was a citizen of Germany, a child of God, a servant of the world. He could not sit still. He wrote: "I have had time to think and pray about my situation and that of my nation, and to have God's will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." In this dark hour in 1939, he returned to Germany. The Gestapo forbid Bonhoeffer to speak in public and banned his books. He worked with the underground church that was being hunted by the Nazis, plotted to assassinate Hitler who he called "Satan in the form of the angel of light," and was arrested, imprisoned for two years, and hung naked on April 9, 1945, 39 years old, hung less than a month before the war ended. "Present your bodies, your lives, your all... as a living sacrifice." God's mercy will carry you beyond your limits.

The power of love born in God's mercy calls, cries out, and summons us all into lives of sacrifice. Parents who tenaciously are trying to save their at risk, defiant child in spite of enormous forces against them. They cry at night, worried about the life of their child. Spouses who are steadily present with their ill spouse, sick, crippled by diseases that eat away life—the day by day sacrifice, the sorrow as their partner is disappearing, exhaustion mixed with worry and sadness and loneliness. One spouse cries as she acknowledges that it is inconvenient to love her because of all her diseases. Her husband touches her with his presence. The sacrifice of standing up for those belittled,

mistreated, abused at work, at school, in the community instead of retreating in fear. Sacrificing your pride and comfort to reengage with someone who hurt you. And then there is the situation where you have been sacrificing your life for someone, but in a way which enables the continuation of irresponsible behavior in the other as this individual uses threat and worry to keep you hooked in. Here the big sacrifice may be to give up sacrificing so that the other is no longer insulated from their reality and must face some hard facts. In spite of the harsh news all around us, the world is filled with the beauty of God's mercy in motion in the lives of living sacrifices.

As much as we might enthusiastically support this mission, we've got a big problem, and the problem is you, it's me, it's us. Essentially we are incapable, inept, too afraid, too greedy, too selfish, too self absorbed, too limited. We actually think too highly of ourselves, and thus we minimize the necessity and urgency of God's merciful, surgical intervention into our lives. Instead of surgery, most Christians settle for outpatient antibiotics in the form of light prayers and episodic worship. The highly qualified, competent, faithful St. Paul writes earlier in Romans 7, that he can't do it, as much as he tries. We could accuse him of having low self esteem and send him into therapy. Or, we could simply admit that he is more in tune with the truth of our human existence. When Paul deeply struggles with the gap between what he desires to do and what he actually does, he ends up at a dead end and then cries out, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" That is a cry for deliverance, for mercy filled surgery. Paul had all the skills, but failed, and according to him, failed miserably. We have found all sorts of ways to kid ourselves into thinking we can do it, with just a little help from the God who fills us up with gasoline from time to time. We are in stage four of denial.

We need something sourced deeper in the marrow of our bones, deeper in the waters of the earth, deeper in the heart of history. We need something greater than the spacious skies, brighter than the moon and sun, more wondrous than the eclipse. We need something beyond us, because it's not in us. We need something powerful enough to defeat our stubborn ego and inflated self, something big enough to love us in spite of our grandiose self reliance. We need someone who has wrestled with the cross and grace and won. We need someone who can create a clean heart in our cluttered lives. We absolutely need the one to whom we cry out, "Lord have mercy."

The church's first job is not to be a service center to the world. There's plenty of clubs around that will help you do that. The church's first job is to be surgical center. Service in the world is a byproduct. The church is foremost a surgical center—baptism is surgery, dying to ourselves with a full replacement of our self with a new creation, fashioned in the heart of God. But we easily forget what Luther reminded us to remember. Baptism is not a one time event. Day after day after day we are to remember and renew our baptism. Day after day after day we are to come in full honesty before God and others, praying for a clean heart and a right spirit. Paul writes in these verses that discernment is a daily task. Baptism is not like going to Niagara Falls and taking pictures. We are to be baptized daily in our prayer, meditation, and the Word....daily. St. Paul writes elsewhere, "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me." That's replacement, not repair. That's surgery, not a self esteem band-aid. The Gospel shouts out that we are in need of rescue, not reminders.

We need nothing less than this major transformation. And that's what it is--the Greek word for transformation is "metamorphosis"—Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world." JB Phillips paraphrases this...he writes, "Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold." Daily, we are pushed and pulled into a world that seeks to mold us into captives of the dark. Paul continues, "but be transformed (be metamorphized)...by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Christian ethics is grounded not in doing good things, but in a metamorphosis, defined in the dictionary as "a profound change" like the caterpillar to the butterfly. How is God right now in your life attempting to metamorphize you—twisting and turning and tossing you around, maybe upside down, so that you might be transformed into what God wants you to be instead of being conformed to your comfort and worn out plans? How is God cracking you open so that a little new light might break through?

As we evolve in God's metamorphosis of us, what might you hear and see? Might you see miracles of rebirth and new creations? Might you see the poor fed and sheltered? Might you hear fresh voices of hope coming from the laments of sadness? Might you feel touches of tenderness in lives torn by resentment? Might you stop and reach out to those you so easily passed by in a rush before? Might your voices of justice shout louder than ever in the midst of those who have been silenced and scorned? Might you apologize for your offenses which before you denied or defended? Might you cast all our cares on your Lord instead holding the weight of the world on your shoulders? Might you see God unfolding a purpose for you when all your doors and windows seem locked for good? Might you feel the waters of hope quenching your fires of fear? Might you take a chance you have been resisting? How is God attempting to metamorphize you now?

A young Christian man adopted out at birth is now 19. He had never met his biological mother—he wanted to, feared to, resisted, yearned, disconnected, and reconnected with his desire. Finally, as he was on the eve of his 20s, probably around the time his biological mom gave birth, he decided to make the leap in fear and trembling and yearning...the ingredients of many great leaps. On that day, his adoptive parents drove him hours away to see his biological mom for the first time. They met—she and him, mother and son, and talked. At first glance, she was different than this very manicured young man. She had jewelry in several different places, tattoos scattered, hair different, and a presence different than his familiar world. He stayed with it, trusting that God was at work. This was his mother..and as the minutes unfolded, a new creation started to emerge. He discovered her loving spirit, her heart of gold, her compassion for others, her work in helping the unfortunate in a welfare center, her sensitivity to scarcity, her regrets and sorrows, her hope and inspiration. They talked, and in those precious moments, he saw more of him in her and more of her in him—what once had been was shifting and what he was slowly dawning on the horizon. He started to find his first mother, and more importantly, the heart of his mother....and his adopted parents were glad for him. He allowed God to metamorphize his fear into an unexpected surprise.

These first two verses of Romans 12 is a foundational message: Our life-long metamorphosis or transformation powered by the mercies of God is the heart of our Christian life. If we dilute all this and simply get busy doing good in the world, we will run on weak knees, anemic blood, collapsed lungs.

A final and critical point should be noted. Worship also forms the basis of Christian ethics and Christian living. Notice in these two verses, critical references to worship. Paul says "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." The word "present" is from the language of worship in the Old Testament. "Present" refers to offering up in honor and thanksgiving to one being honored. It's not simply "make your bodies a living sacrifice." The word is "present" yourself as a sacrifice---your best and greatest offering to God. To be rooted in the mercies of God and to live out our lives as a living sacrifice is our most complete form of worship, writes St. Paul, and our best honoring of the One whose word brought us into existence and who unfolds all our days.

And then there is this—Two times in these two verses Paul uses the word translated "acceptable": may living our lives as a living sacrifice be "acceptable" to God and may our discerning of God's will be "acceptable" to God. The word "acceptable" sounds like "passable/OK." Another translation which I like better is the word "pleasing." May living as a living sacrifice and discerning the will of God be "pleasing" to God. Think of that—Our goal is not about "proving" ourselves to God and anyone else, but to delight in "pleasing" God. The roots of Christian ethics lie in the cultivation of joy between God and us. All this is the basis of the beautiful life—a life full of mercy, a life full of song and sacrifice, a life unfolding with new beginnings and unexpected wonders, a dynamic life deep in the heart of God that never will end. May the pretty bird sing in your life with a song that never ends because the touch of God will never leave you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

