

Dying to Self

Preached on The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Jan. 23, 2022

Text: Rom. 12: 16-21

Our Anglican Fathers saw fit to place before the Church the whole of Romans 12 during the first three Sundays after Epiphany. We complete that task today as we see how the Body of Christ should relate to the world. Earlier, St. Paul has insisted that right worship—orthodoxy—not only is the worship that pleases God, but also forms our interior lives as baptized persons as well as forming our life together in the Church. Right worship is God’s instrument for our salvation and for our perfecting in grace. Through it we should more and more fully participate in Christ.

We could see much of Romans 12 as asking the question “How should the Church and her children behave in the world that not only does not follow Christ, but is frequently hostile to him?” If Christians are truly participating in Christ, their minds should be renewed, as Paul says near the beginning of Chapter 12. Jesus didn’t come to save some invisible soul within us that is isolated from what we do, what we love, and how we interact with others. Modern people like to compartmentalize, and speak in a facile way about their “inner life” vs. their public interactions, or their “spiritual lives” vs. their practical ones. But for the vast majority of human history, people would not have been able to make sense of a strong public/private split. It seems obvious that what we really believe and value will eventually have some behavioral manifestation, even if it must be suppressed in certain contexts. We cannot erect a hard boundary between our Christian lives and our “everyday life,” aiming to treat them separately, as though one has nothing to do with the other. Engaging in such a task leads to a disintegrated life that sequesters the sacred from the profane, usually to the detriment of the former. The sacred is restricted to a smaller and smaller space until it becomes effectively neutralized.

But the thinking of St. Paul knows nothing of this compartmentalization. If we are Christians, we are new beings. We are not simply individuals, unchanged except for a bar code slapped on us that will scan “Saved” at the end of the age. Rather, as members of Christ we are also “every one members one of another.” If we have been baptized into Jesus’ humanity and participate in his life, we are, in a manner of speaking, baptized into one another and so participate really and truly in one another. No one is merely an individual person, a monad, an isolated consciousness. We are not really persons unless we are socialized into a community, and true Christian community is one where believers participate in Christ, and thus participate in one another. We find our true selves only in this community. We are not to define ourselves in opposition to our brothers and sisters, but through sharing our lives together.

Earlier St. Paul wrote that we should not think of ourselves too highly. We each have a part to play, but that part has its proper place and value only when we realize that we are members of each other and don’t operate in splendid isolation. There is a common

belief in the liberal West that we find who we really are by following the voice of our true “inner self,” the only gauge of true “authenticity.” But this voice can only speak in a language that carries with it a culture we did not create, but rather inherited. Creative individuals can modify that culture in interesting ways, but even they are not its creators. The desire to be a lone and independent creator of all meaning and value might seem to drive the Romantic hero, but that impulse often leads to madness, or, at least, to being absolutely insufferable. Christian heroism is found in following Christ, who didn’t spend his time on earth crafting a unique personality, but dying to self and forfeiting his prerogatives. He “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Phil. 2: 6-7) Similarly, we become what we were made to be, not by seeking to be an exception or chasing that modern idol of autonomy, unhindered by the needs of others. Rather, and paradoxically, we become our true selves by putting others first: loving them, encouraging them, and serving them. We become Christ-like, and hence truly human, by acting the way he would have us act. Paul encourages his readers to practice Christ-like virtues. We should be “aglow with the Spirit...patient in tribulation...constant in prayer. We should “practice hospitality...bless those who persecute [us]...rejoice with those who rejoice [and] weep with those who weep.” Christians are to “live in harmony with one another...not be haughty, but associate with the lowly...repay no one evil for evil.”

When Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans there were no more than a few dozen Christians scattered throughout a city with a population close to 1,000,000 people. They had no power or wealth and were, for all intents and purposes, invisible. One or two families, probably merchants, had some personal wealth, and Paul mainly addressed them when he wrote of the gift of giving riches. Furthermore, it is fair to assume that during his 2 year stay in Rome, Paul ordained men who eventually came to be called the episcopate. Certainly by the year 90, about 35 years after Paul wrote the epistle, each house church had a bishop and assisting priests who were to preach the Apostles’ doctrine, to celebrate Holy Communion, and to oversee the care of the poor, the sick and the widows. Christians were still an insignificant minority. That is approximately what it looked like in Rome until around 110 C.E., when things began to change rapidly, with lots of growth in the house churches, significant cooperation and sharing between them, and a common, centralized treasury that each church contributed to for the aid of Christians inside and outside the city. Still, Christians were mostly invisible and when they were noticed, they were considered strange and weird—not good citizens, but not really a threat.

Christians in Rome were immersed in ancestral traditions in which the Roman family, the nursery of Roman virtue and the most basic building block of Roman society, was ruled by the paterfamilias. Roman ancestral virtue meant everything. To be a good man or a good woman was to carry out one’s role effectively. No one was just “good” *simpliciter*. To call a thing or person “good” required that you knew the purpose or proper function of that thing or person. To be a good Roman was to be a good citizen and a good member of one’s family, and there were concrete and non-arbitrary ways of determining this. Our words faith and piety meant one thing in a Christian context, but something very different in a Roman one. We think of the faithfulness as trusting obedience to God

without any assured worldly “pay-off.” Piety for Christians concerns devotion leading to holiness. Faithfulness for a Roman, however, was to uphold family honor by doing reliably his duty as a Roman citizen. Piety was understood as religious duty, but even more importantly as duty to family elders. Virtue was not so much evidenced in holiness but in effectiveness and status. *Dignitas*, the upshot of all virtues, was the sum of the man’s reputation and personal influence, accrued throughout his life of service to the city and the family. It was what entitled a man to respect and honor.

The way of life that Paul is insistent upon for Christians is exactly the kind of behavior that made no sense to the pagans of Rome and to many in our day. Concern with status and respect consumed Romans and still does in the 21st Century. But being baptized into Jesus means dying with Jesus as well as rising to a new life with him, a new life that involves imitating and internalizing his way of life, his humility, his forgiveness, his willingness to be persecuted. It is easy to see that Paul essentially takes Jesus’ teaching from the Sermon on the Mount and assumes that we not only can, but *must* live accordingly.

Paul is concerned that Christians behave toward their pagan neighbors in a manner that may be summed up as an imitation of Christ, and for Paul one’s behavior is an external signifier, a sign of one’s very real interior life. They cannot be separated. We are to imitate Jesus the Messiah who did not curse but rather prayed for those who crucified him. To a Roman, such a response to mistreatment was a sign of weakness and such behavior covered one’s self, one’s city, and one’s family with shame. From a Roman point of view it was considered immoral. But for Christians, wishing evil upon the person who has harmed you is simply irreconcilable to following Jesus.

Furthermore, Paul says that Christians should not pursue power alliances, but rather ought to pursue affiliation and caring relations with those from whom we have nothing to gain in the world’s eyes. That sounds just as ridiculous today as it must have sounded to Romans back then. For them, as well as many of us, relationships are viewed strategically. So much depends on “networking,” on maneuvering toward a more important position in the hierarchy, on connecting with those who wield power and influence. Favors are often performed with the aim of getting something back. Time spent cultivating a relationship is an investment that will—hopefully—one day yield a good return in terms of career and prestige. How ridiculous then is Paul’s command to “associate with the lowly.” How will that advance you in life?

But, of course, associating with the lowly isn’t ridiculous if that is the way the God of creation relates to us. And the reward of this faithfulness is far beyond any advancement we achieve in this fleeting life. Continuous concern with our own dignity and status results in a pathetic attempt at being God-like, at which we must all fail. True life is enjoyed by those who abandon such folly and humbly take up their cross.

In the Name...