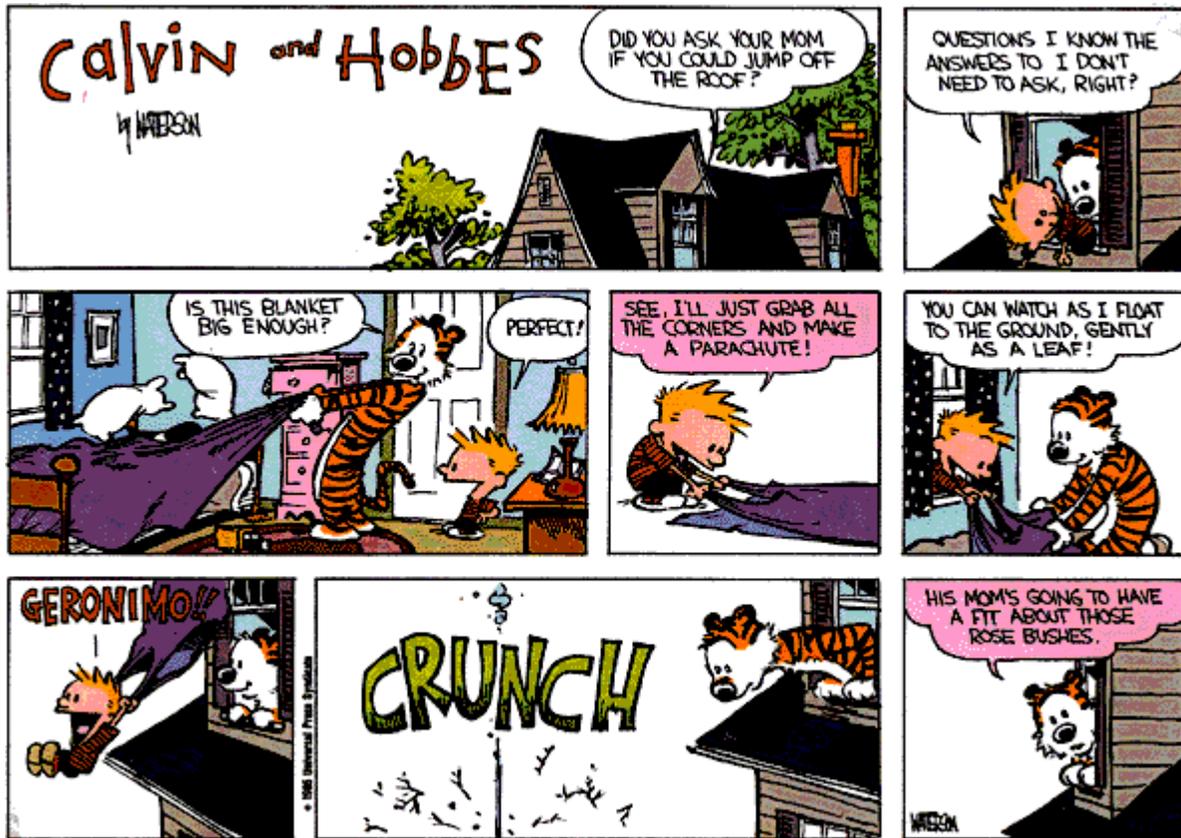


Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
August 21, 2011
Romans 12.1-8
"A Living Sacrifice"
Pastor John Guthrie



It is very much like Calvin to throw himself with utter abandon into one enterprise or another. In fact, Calvin excels at complete, full, and unmitigated dedication to whatever task he has taken on himself.

Paul writes to the fragile church in Rome: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; this is your spiritual worship." You can probably guess where I will be going with today's sermon: "What does it mean to offer our bodies as living sacrifices?"

Before we begin down that path, however, I wanted you to know how difficult it was for me to choose the passage from Romans as my preaching text today. Why? Because the gospel text from Matthew is more or less at the center of our journey of discipleship under Christ, both as individuals and as a body of believers, the church. And why is that? Because in that passage, and its parallels in Mark and Luke, Jesus asks his little band of followers, "Who do you say that I am?"

The answer to that question, for his disciples at that time, and for us, is unimaginably critical. If we believe that Jesus never really existed, that he was made up by leaders of the early church, that belief will dictate how we live as disciples. If we believe that Jesus was simply a man, a very wise and thoughtful teacher, then that also will determine how we live our lives. If we believe that Jesus was simply a social reformer, challenging the injustice of the Roman empire, then that belief will mold the way we practice our faith. If we believe that Jesus was simply set on reforming a corrupt religious establishment, then our discipleship will be formed by that understanding.

But if we believe, like Peter, that Jesus was and is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, then frankly we no longer have an excuse. We can't dismiss him, and we can't dismiss his grip on our lives. We can't ignore him. We can't relegate him to one of many idols we worship. We can't worship him only on Sundays and live like the rest of our culture the other six days of the week. In fact, we can't really live at all like the rest of our culture, any day of the week.

So, you see, the answer that Peter gives in response to the question Jesus asks is critically important. And the answer we give to the same question is critically important. Who do you say that Jesus is? Who do you say that Jesus is?

As always, when we turn our attention to the first eight verses of chapter twelve in Paul's letter to the Romans, it is essential that we know what has preceded those verses in the letter, because the preceding verses set the context for what Paul writes. The first eleven chapters of Romans are Paul's masterful theological study on such topics as sin, redemption, the proper understanding of the ancient law of Moses, what it means to be righteous, the importance of faith or trust in Christ, the free gift of grace, God's love and protection for his children, and God's plan for the Jews.

After this long theological treatise, Paul begins in chapter 12 his discussion, based on what has gone before, of how we are to live. In other words, Paul begins in chapter 12 his ethical exhortations. Since God has given us the free gift of redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; since God's love and protection can never be limited or lost; since the living God has a plan for the redemption of all of creation; THEREFORE, Paul writes in chapter 12, verse 1. Therefore, what follows is the way in which you are to live. Therefore, what follows is how you are to care for one another. Therefore, what follows is how you are to be the living body of Christ until he returns. Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore..."

Get ready, Paul is saying. I've given you the theology lesson. Now prepare to hear how it matters in the way you conduct your lives, and especially the way you conduct your lives as members of a particular collection of Christ-followers, a particular local church.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sister, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; this is your spiritual worship." Some translations have, "This is your true worship." Our true worship is to present our bodies as living sacrifices.

Because of our separation in time and culture from first century Judea, the idea of a sacrifice as Paul uses it here is difficult for us to comprehend. One of the many benefits I have accrued in recent weeks as a result of reading the Bible intensely with those who have embarked with me on a journey through the Bible in 90 days, is the reading of the book of Leviticus from beginning to end. Leviticus centers in large part on the Jewish system of animal and other sacrifices, which the LORD commands be made at the temple in Jerusalem. There are sin offerings and guilt offerings and burnt offerings and grain offerings, and the ways in which these offerings are

to be made by the priests of the temple are described in excruciating detail in Leviticus.

Paul writes to the Roman Christians: present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Obviously Paul doesn't want the disciples in Rome to climb up on an altar and give up their lives in that literal way. But he does mean for them to give up their lives in a more figurative way. He understands that, in response to the affirmation of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, they, and we, are to offer all that we are and all that we have in service to Christ. If you were here with us two weeks ago, you will remember that we looked at a prayer written by John Wesley, known as the Covenant Prayer. I won't reproduce the entire prayer again for you, but the first few lines of that prayer fit so well with this idea of offering our bodies as living sacrifices, that I would like for you to hear them again:

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
Exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

John Wesley had a pretty good grasp on what it means to offer one's body as a living sacrifice.

It means that we are to hold nothing back, and to keep nothing in reserve. We are to be fully and completely in the service of God, as directed by the Holy Spirit. Giving our bodies as living sacrifices means that we may have to willingly give up security and possessions. It means we may have to alienate some members of our families. I believe that it means our support of this church's ministries, financially and in service, is to be a sacrifice. If somewhere along the way we were sold the idea that following Jesus was going to be easy, we were sold a bill of goods. What does it mean in your life to yield your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God?

Then Paul writes this: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Another major lesson for me as I have worked with my colleagues in reading the entire Bible in 90 days: the pressure on you and me to conform is not a new thing. In fact, that pressure was a major temptation to the ancient people of Israel, and one that received a great deal of attention in the law of Moses, in the history books of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the wisdom literature contained there, and in the messages of the prophets.

One of the most destructive ways in which the ancient Hebrews conformed was in the worship of idols, not the living God, but dead gods, gods who are not gods, as it is written in several places in the Hebrew scriptures. The neighbors of the Hebrews worshiped Baal and lots of little Baals, and Asherah and Molech and others. The Hebrews built altars to these not-gods. They even built shrines to them inside the temple, the residence of the only true God, in Jerusalem. And all of this in spite of the very first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God. You shall have no other gods besides me." And if you don't think the ancient Hebrews got a thorough and dire warning from the prophets about this behavior, well: time to read the prophets.

Conformity. The pressure is insidious and subtle and pervasive and deadly. And we still have it today. Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, or this age. Rather, be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

How are we tempted to conform? We are tempted to worship the idols of security, money, possessions, pleasure, ease, comfort, power, influence, honor, and others. These are our idols. We build our shrines and altars to these gods-that-are-not-gods.

We also idolize political parties and human leaders, and we do so at great peril. God is not a Democrat. And God is not a Republican. Do not be conformed. And as wonderful as our nation is, it is not God. Do not be conformed. Our worship is reserved for the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and only for the living God. The ancient Hebrews failed on that account. We must be constantly on guard against the ways in which our culture attempts to make us conform. To be a Christ-follower is to live a counter-cultural life. And to be the church of Christ is to be a counter-cultural fellowship.

Paul continues, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you should.” Instead, Paul continues, recognize yourself as one member of the body of Christ, like a member of a human body: a hand or foot or eye or ear or whatever. The same comparison is made in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12.

The idea is that none of us has any reason to think of ourselves more highly than anyone else, for all of us are needed in order for the body to work and function well. The body needs hands and feet and ears and eyes. Every fellowship of Christ-followers, like ours, needs prophets and ministers and teachers and exhorters and givers and leaders and people of compassion.

The underlying message is also this: no one gets to opt out. If one of us thinks that she has no gifts to offer, and therefore offers none, the body, our church, suffers for it. And if one of us thinks that he is too busy to employ his gifts for the good of the body, the body suffers. And if one of us would rather engage in other activities rather than using her gifts, our body suffers. Frankly, we don't get to opt out. To do that is to fail in the project of offering our lives as living sacrifices. What gifts has the living God given you? And how are you using them to strengthen this body, our church? The pastor is available to consult on these questions.

It all boils down again to that question that Jesus is constantly asking of us, “Who do you say that I am?” If you and I are not yet to the point of saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” then it is likely that our response is going to be lukewarm, halfhearted, tepid, and weak. And that response will surely fall short of a living sacrifice. Of course, we never become perfect disciples; you and I are always and constantly on a path of growth, the path of sanctification.

Jesus is looking for sold-out disciples. Not halfhearted ones. Zealous followers. Not wimpy ones. Followers who are transformed. Not conformed. Disciples who willingly use their gifts for the good of the body. Not ones who hoard their gifts for their own profit.

Who do you say that he is?