

**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**23 August 2020**

**Romans 12:1-8**

I have a clean Irish joke for you today, although “Clean Irish Joke” sounds like an oxymoron. “Paddy Murphy arrived at Boston's Logan airport and wandered about the terminal with tears streaming down his cheeks. A Texan from Houston asked him if he was homesick. 'No,' replied the Irishman. 'It's worse, I have I've lost all me luggage.' 'That's terrible, how did that happen?' 'The cork fell out of my bottle', said Paddy.” Silly, little joke, to start us off. And before you complain about the joke being promulgating stereotypes about Irish people, let me tell you that this joke was told to me by an Irishman three years ago this week. Now let us talk about the Romans passage.

When a passage of Holy Scripture begins with the words “Therefore,” you need to assume that the passage builds on an argument that came before. It is the consequence or the result of a prior theme. In a way Paul has been building an argument for 11 chapters and now he arrives at some logical conclusions. The argument that he has been building is this: prior to the coming of Messiah we were slaves to sin. Slaves have no control of their bodies because they are subject to the treatment of the master who can abuse them, beat them, exploit them, make them work until they pass out, etc. Slaves have little control over the exercise of their thoughts because they have no freedom of expression, they cannot just say whatever is on their minds without the master's permission. Slaves have no real way to pay debts other than through their labor because most of them were not allowed to own property or savings, etc. Saying that we were slaves to sin means for Paul that our total lives, minds, and bodies belonged to sin.

Before Christ we were slaves to a debt called sin. We were slaves because we could never pay the debt, the price for the sin was just too high. In first century Palestine, when you could not pay your debts you either went to debtors prisons or, most commonly, you became a servant, no better than a slave, of the one to whom you were indebted. Often, even your entire family was forced into slavery as a result of the debt. Spiritually speaking, no one could be fully obedient to the Law, and this inability to obey the law made us sinners. Unable to pay the spiritual price for our sin we became slaves to sin. Sin controlled our lives and had a hold on us that was unbreakable even when we offered animal or grain sacrifices.

These practices were meant to help us atone for our sin and reduce the debt, but our sin was so great that they were never enough. As a result, we became enslaved to our passions. Our bodies and minds became unavoidably chained to the high demands sin placed on our lives. Now, when you read it like that, it almost makes God sound like an unforgiving deity obsessed with the idea of getting a pound of flesh from each of us. But, what if we change the word sin for the word addiction? Then the phrase would sound the following way, “Unable to pay the price of our addictions, we became unavoidably chained to the high demands addiction placed in our lives.” In a way, this is what Paul is saying.

But then, Paul affirms, we became believers and, having accepted baptism into Jesus of Nazareth, we also accepted to die with him. It is this death with Christ that initiates our freedom from the captivity of sin. Slaves who die are considered free. Therefore once we died with Christ on the cross, the hold of sin on our lives disappeared, the bonds of oppression were loosed, and we finally defeated the powers of darkness. We were able to do this because Jesus took all our sin to the cross and paid the final price, erased the debt, and wiped out our guilt. But we, believers, did not just die with Jesus on the cross, we also rose with him in his resurrection. We passed from death to life and from slavery to freedom. And when we rose again spiritually, we were born free.

Now, we have freedom and control. We can choose to honor God without fear of sin because Christ has conquered sin on our behalf. We no longer have to be slaves to our passions. We can now worship God in freedom with minds and hearts and souls centered on him. And this is where Paul begins today. Since we are free from the yoke of sin through Christ, “Therefore, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Since, by the mercies of God, Christ paid for our salvation and secured our freedom from slavery, then we have choices we can make, we are free to worship God as we please. Paul says, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”

In other words, we must, in perfect freedom, “Love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls and minds, and our neighbor as ourselves.” This is our spiritual worship. Our physical worship was the sacrificial system, but that system had limited success without love of God in freedom and love of neighbor. Now we can choose a better sacrifice than the sacrifice of animals and grains. We can offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. We can dedicate our total lives to the service of God and God’s people.

In order to do this, Paul adds, we must 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.” This is the real key of this passage. Because we are free from slavery, we can renew our minds and oppose the demands of our world. We can discern the will of God for our lives and choose to obey it. This discernment of the will of God in our lives can only happen when we discern the pull the spirit of the age has on us and we choose a better way. And Paul gives us a few clues as to how we can discern the spirit of the world and avoid being conformed to it.

Paul says, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” This is the first great challenge. Do not think of yourself as superior to all. Do not think that life is about you and only you. Do not think of your needs and wants as somehow more important or superior to the needs and wants of your family, community, or church. This is the first challenge to the spirit of the day for us. We live in a society where we have learned to come first. We are an army of one and who must take care of number one. Happiness is dependent upon who recognizes us: Happy is the man who has thousands of Social Media followers, gets millions of likes on Facebook posts, and is always revered and envied by everyone.

The spirit of the day teaches us that we must place the self at the top of our value systems and priorities. The “I” comes first, second, and third. We are constantly introspected, we seek eternal self-improvement, we isolate in our Crystal towers and look at the world’s plights from a distance, and we distance from meaningful human contact, choosing made-up social media worlds where everyone can be whoever they want to be.

There is a war being fought in our society. A war for our minds and our hearts. Media advertisement, billboards, Hollywood, 24-hour news channels, print media, and even radio all compete to influence our minds and hearts. The real purpose for this intense messaging is to make us “Consumers first.” The media promises us eternal happiness, eternal health, agelessness, security from all dangers, unlimited entertainment, distraction from the ills of the world, and fantasy lives for those who can afford them. They convince us that we deserve these things, we have the right to have them. The end result is the belief that comfort and entertainment can vanquish all our fears, reduce our anxiety, and help us live longer and more fulfilled lives. Eternity is possible for the right price! The end result of these intense messages is the belief that we come first. That life is always about us.

Yet, Paul tells us “Do not think of yourself higher.” Not in society, and especially, not in church. He reminds us here, as he has done in many other places, that we are “One Body.” He says, “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” When we think we are superior, we begin to believe our gifts, talents and ministries are superior to the gifts, talents, and ministries of others. But, God has given us all different gifts in accordance with our faith and abilities. What is important is that we place those talents and abilities at the service of the church and that we all contribute, in whatever measure we can, to the benefit of the whole. Those who have a gift for hospitality must place that gift at the service of their community. Same with those who have the gift of prayer, those who teach, those who fund our ministries, those who lead, etc. We must give as we are able and we must place our talents at the service of others. And we must do it with cheerfulness. Not under compulsion because we are no longer slaves, but freely and lovingly.

For Paul, Christ is the only head of the Church and we are his body. Therefore, we all must do our part to allow Christ, the head, to lead us where we must go. But first, we must choose to resist the temptations of the world to conform to this “me generation.” We must choose altruism, generosity, forgiveness, service, reconciliation, humility, radical hospitality, peace-making and peace seeking. Where there is hatred, we must share Christ’s love for the world. Where there is hopelessness, we must bring the hope that only comes from following Christ. Where there is despair, we must bring a radical love that chooses self-sacrifice and service as our way to deal with the world. But, my friends, all of this service begins here in this congregation. We all must become involved, placing our talents at the service of others. We must become involved for the church to thrive and grow. So, today, I invite you to generosity of time, talent, and treasure. We are doing God’s work together and we need all hands on deck. May God continue to bless you. Amen!