

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Living According To The Measure Of Faith
Romans 12:1-8

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1 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, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of your selves more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Diagnosis: Living According to the Measure of Our Gifts

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Members unto Ourselves: Living in a Meritocracy*

As Paul knew, life is a social affair. As he also knew, keeping the body politic with its many members together is precarious. As fallen human creatures, we tend to be members unto ourselves rather than what the Creator intended us to be: “members one of another” (v 5). Indeed, in response to the threat of dissolution, every society (the Romans’ as well as ours) necessarily develops a philosophy of life (we might call it a religion) as to how it will hang together as a cohesive body. Moreover, intimately connected to that philosophy is a process of assigning value and worth to its various members toward that end. For example, in days of old, societies had “classes” of people based on bloodline. Royalty, nobility, commoners and peasants made up the groupings, and each person was assigned value and worth in the whole according the measure of his or her parentage. Our society, of course, has a different philosophy-or at least it appears so on the surface. We live in what some call a “meritocracy,” where value is assigned according to the measure of our deeds, which in turn, are possible only according to the measure of our gifts. And there is the rub. Not all have the same gifts and not all gifts have the same value, at least according to the measure of our society. And so, a new form of classism emerges on the basis of our giftedness, our genetic makeup, what our parentage has bequeathed us. And rather than cohesion, where we all think of ourselves as “members one of another” (v. 5), we find ourselves pitted against each other, gift against gift, member against member, living with the illusion that the whole can somehow gain cohesion despite the fact that each seeks his or her own interest. And so, in spite of the best-laid plans for cohesion, life in community, life in the “body” politic remains precarious.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Thinking Too Highly of Ourselves* (v. 3)

Latent in this social problem, this meritocracy, is a personal or individual problem of misplaced faith: “misplaced” meaning placed in something other than the Christ-but more on that later. Those who are having their lives valued according to the measure of their gifts will naturally be driven to overestimate (place undue faith) in their gifts for the sake of social advantage. In the words of Paul, they will tend to “think of [themselves] more highly than [they] ought to think” (v. 3). For, in truth, we are the sum of our gifts. We are the endowment we have been given. To trust in our gifts is to trust in ourselves. But lest we think that only the infamous “they” is tempted to overestimate their priority in the whole, Paul notes, “by the grace of God given to me I say [this warning] to everyone” (v. 3). You and I are included. While the literary emphasis on “everyone” is mine, the theological emphasis it underscores is Paul’s. For the problem of misplaced faith (in the self and one’s giftedness) is so natural to every human being that Paul describes his ability to see that malady as a “grace” (v. 3)-as a favor or gift given him by God. Misplaced faith is nothing other than having our minds “conformed to this world” (v. 2) and its philosophy. To place our faith in ourselves is to isolate ourselves from all other help.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Dismemberment of the Body of This World*

The ultimate problem that accompanies the religion of meritocracy with its message of “trust in yourself” is not that it (and its devotees) have not “discerned” something of the “will of God” (v. 2). To the contrary, that philosophy has partly, at least, discerned that part of the will of God known as Law, as Paul calls it, namely, the demand that we be “good and acceptable and perfect” (v. 2). Elsewhere Paul links

knowledge of the Law with the natural phenomenon of conscience and the basic outlines of both Jewish and Gentile culture (2:15). But that social knowledge of the Law is limited, not because it is so hard to understand, but because it is more than the political and personal markets can bear. The problem is that our social philosophies of life and the workings of our consciences lack the “gift” that is needed to meet that demand of the Law, to attain the “what” of being “good, acceptable, and perfect.” Consequently, discerning the will of God as Law is not a blessing, it is not a “renewing of the mind” (v. 2), but a curse. As Paul says elsewhere, the Law in itself is not a saving help to sinners; rather, it simply reveals that sin is “at work in our members to bear the fruit of death” (7:5). The will of God as Law means the ultimate dissolution of the world is God’s just judgment (1:19), member by member-and no amount of philosophizing or exercising of our gifts can change that.

Prognosis: Living According to the Measure of Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Body of Christ and the Gift of Mercy*

If the world, the body politic, is awash with members of every imaginable gift and, yet, it (member by member) lacks “the Gift” to meet the demands of God’s lawful will (e.g., that we be “good and acceptable, and perfect”), then where can the gift be found? Answer: The gift is “mercy” (v. 1) and the place where it is found is in the Body of Christ (v. 5). What a strange, yet marvelous, thing this Body of Christ is. This body begins with the Son of God first becoming one with the body of this World, taking upon himself our sinful flesh, our body of death. This he does, paradoxically, only so that he become dismembered from this world, as we ourselves must be, by enduring the judgment of God’s Law to its fullest end. In this marvelous encounter, which culminates in the crucifixion, Jesus fulfills the Law-or better, the Law is fulfilled in him. The Law is fulfilled in that it

accomplishes that purpose for which it was ordained: to work the death of sinful flesh that Christ assumed in his incarnation. Yet, when he was dismembered from this world, that is, crucified, he rose again to embody a new creation, one free from sin, death, and also the Law. Because Christ died to the Law he is, as Paul insists, “the end of the law” (10:4) and the beginning of a new creation (as he says in 2 Cor. 5:17 and Gal. 6:15), a “remnant chosen by grace” (11:5), as he says later in Romans. Christ Jesus is now that unique point in the world that is no longer of the world. He is that “Gift,” which we lack in ourselves, but which we need in order to meet the demand of the Law and live again! But more, his resurrection in the world means that the will of God itself has been “transformed” (v. 2) in the person of Christ. Christ now embodies the will of God anew. This he does with the one-two punch of his death and resurrection. First, in his crucifixion, Jesus co-opts the lawful will of God using it to bring death to the sinners he has taken upon himself. But, then, second, in his resurrection, he surpasses (overturns) that lawful will of God by bringing life out of the death of sinners. That new will of God in Christ is mercy-that is for Paul “what is good and acceptable and perfect” (v. 2)-and that new will spells good news for sinners.

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution) – Faith As “Thinking with Sober Judgment” (v. 3)

The new will of God that is established in Christ is mercy. That is the Gift of gifts-grace (v. 6), as Paul calls it. But how does that will become accomplished for real-life sinners? Answer: “by the measure of faith that God has assigned” (v. 3). That is a tricky turn of phrase, one that appears nowhere else in Paul. It is easy for us to hear the term “measure” in quantitative terms, but that misses the mark. What is the “measure of faith that God has assigned” so we might “discern what is the will of God-what is good, acceptable and perfect (v.

2)? Answer: not faith in ourselves or our giftedness, but faith in Christ. Christ is the “measure of our faith.” Faith that is in Jesus Christ is faith that measures up to God’s new will in Christ. Christ is the One whom God has “assigned” us to trust for mercy. He is the one who is “good and acceptable and perfect” before God. Therefore to believe in Christ is the will of God for us. To believe in Christ is to have his goodness, his acceptability, and his perfection as our own. The new will of God for sinners is therefore faith in Christ. Here, however, Paul also wants us to understand that faith in Christ does have a humbling feature to it. Since Christ, and not our deeds, is the basis of our goodness, our acceptability, our perfection before God, naturally we will “think with sober judgment” about our selves. That is not a downer, but simply the way we experience faith as being dis-membered from the world (dying to sin) and being re-membered in Christ (rising to newness of life).

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) – Members One of Another (v. 5)

Faith not only makes us a member of the body of Christ, but it makes all Christians “members one of another” (v. 5). That means that we as the church, the Body of Christ, also have a new way to think about the many gifts we possess individually as members. Those gifts are no longer used and exercised in conformity with the world’s agenda, that is, in order to gain benefit for ourselves or to somehow prove to the Law that we are good, acceptable and perfect. That way of thinking has now been “transformed” (v. 2). Our various gifts can now be employed for the purposes for which God originally gave them-for each other as each has need for the good of the whole body. The disparity of gifts and abilities that exists between individual members of the body of Christ is not to lead us into to classism. That way of viewing things is “conformity to this world” (v. 2). Rather,

the variety of gifts, randomly spread throughout the membership of the Body, is a sign of God's abundant provisioning through the community. We are not members unto our selves; rather, we are necessarily "members one of another." That is an insight that comes with the "renewing of our minds" (v. 2). Although Paul's list of gifts (vv. 6-7) is illustrative and not exhaustive, what is clear is that the community needs all of them according to the measure of need. What's more, all of them are exercised out of one-and-the-same faith in Jesus Christ. That is, they are exercised "sacrificially" (v. 1). To live as "members one of another" (v. 5) is what it means "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship." To live by faith is to live one for another. Such faith, such life, is our spiritual worship. It is how we honor and embody the new will of God established in Christ.