

Sermon for August 23, 2020
The 12th Sunday after Pentecost
Bishop Paul D. Erickson

Romans 12:1-8

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. 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. 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. 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. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace, from the God of steadfast love and endurance; amen. (sigh) 2020. What a year. When we turned the calendar to this new year and this new decade some seven plus months ago, few of us could have imagined all that would take place. Oh, we knew it was an election year, and much of our national attention would be consumed by the often divisive and combative nature of the political ads and debates and conversations leading up to November 3. We now know that a few scientists were aware of the novel Coronavirus, appearing in China, and they may well have wondered if this would turn into the global pandemic that they had been warning us about for decades, but I think it’s safe to say that no one really knew how this would play out. I think it’s also safe to say that the racial injustices and stark inequalities in our systems of law enforcement, education, economics, and health care have been known and experienced by countless folks for generations, but I don’t think anyone could have predicted the ways that the killing of George Floyd in late May would spark a global movement for justice and reform. It seems that the events of this year are forcing us to focus, some might say with 20/20 vision, on the challenges and injustices that have long been with us, and too long ignored.

The Apostle Paul writes, “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.” Paul invites us to take a step back, to not get swept up by the swirling currents of chaos, confusion, conflict, and change of our present age, so that we might find our minds renewed and able to discern the unchanging and ever-present will of the God of love.

That certainly seems to be the challenge of this year, and any year for that matter: how do we discern the will of God? How do we know what to do, and who to listen to? As we wrestle with the decisions about how and where and when we are going to worship, learn, connect, and serve in the coming weeks and months in the midst of this unending pandemic, as we reckon with the ways that we, as the Whitest denomination in this country, have actively supported and quietly condoned policies, beliefs, and behaviors that have perpetuated racism and white supremacy, and as we move into this election season, trying to identify and elect the leaders who will guide our country into an uncertain and unstable future, it is easy to become quickly overwhelmed by the sheer number of voices and experts and opinions and facts that we are being bombarded with.

We have been trained to believe that there is a right answer out there somewhere, and if we can just figure out who the right expert is, or who the right leader is, or what the right prayer is that we need to pray, we can find the solution that will solve our problems and allow us to return to our normal lives, whatever that means. Of course, deep down, I think we all know that the world doesn't work this way, and that any solution that is quick and easy is rarely trustworthy.

So, what are we to do? The apostle Paul, after inviting us to step back from the swirling currents of this world so that we might discern God's will for our lives and our world, urges us to embrace two simple yet life-changing values: humility and community. First, he writes, “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.” In other words, none of us is smart enough to figure this out by ourselves, and none of us are so important that our voice carries more weight than others.

Paul continues with an invitation to remember that we are part of a community of believers. He writes, “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.” We belong to each other, and we need to slow down and take the time to listen to the voices that are all too often ignored.

It's striking to me that, as Paul strives to give us wisdom in how to discern the will of God, his invitation for us to remain humble and remember we are part of a community may seem to make things worse, not better. If none of us is smart enough to figure this out for ourselves and we are supposed to listen to everyone, how will we ever know who is right? How will we ever know what to do? Fortunately, even though those who assign the weekly readings in our lectionary chose to end today's reading at verse eight, Paul doesn't end there. Go ahead and read the rest of Romans 12, and in the portion that is assigned for next Sunday, he writes, in verses nine and ten, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” This sounds a lot like what Jesus was talking about when he reminded us that the greatest commandments are to love God with all our heart, and mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

That's how we know how to sort through the confusing and competing claims on our attention and our loyalty, that's how we know what to say and what to do: is it born out of and does it help us deepen our love of God and neighbor? It's not about my rights, or my freedoms, or my needs, or my fears. It is always, and only, about how I can better love God and neighbor.

And if what I say or do or what I don't say or do is somehow contributing to the pain or fear among my siblings, I need to stop, listen, repent, and change. This is the only way we will find our way forward amid all the overwhelming challenges and confusing decisions that we are facing these days; by remembering that we belong to each other, and we are accountable to the God of love.

On Sunday afternoon, August 23, I will be participating in a Day of Repentance and Solidarity regarding the sin of racism and white supremacy. This will be an ecumenical and multi-cultural gathering of folks, in person at the State Fair Park grandstand at 3 pm, masks and distancing require, and it will be viewable online, as well. This event will provide an opportunity for White Christians from a variety of communities and traditions to humble ourselves, to recognize that the sin of racism does not just harm our black and brown siblings, but it harms us all, and we need to listen, repent, and take one more step on the long road of reconciliation and healing. This event will be followed by an opportunity to engage in bible studies, conversations, and sermon series on the history and legacy of racism, and our call to move in a new direction. For more information, go to the website www.weraceahead.com, and take the pledge to become an antiracist individual in an antiracist church.

I am coming to believe that this year, this 2020, could well be a major turning point in the history of our church, our country, and our global community. The question is, to whom and to what will we turn? I pray that we will turn away from the voices that seek to fan the flames of fear and division, so that we might turn to and follow the voices of those calling us to humility, reconciliation, and love. Thanks be to God; amen.