

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, August 21, 2011.*

(Exodus 1:8-2; 10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20)

Let's hear again these words from Paul's letter to the Romans. "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." Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and well pleasing to God. I want to begin with a story. This past week I was here at the church one afternoon and the doorbell rang, and at the door was a man whose body looked tired and dirty. He and his wife and their three dogs were on their way home to Pennsylvania in a very small car, and they were out of gas, out of food and out of luck. The man kept apologizing for the poor appearance of his body. He showed me his hands, which were filthy from constantly tending the car engine to keep it from overheating. And I could tell by looking at his hands that, in my grandfather's words, this was someone who worked for a living. My nose told me that he was telling the truth that they had slept in their car the last few days. This man named Ray presented himself at the doors of our church, and asked for some work so he could earn some gas money. I'll come back to his story in just a minute.

Saint Paul urges the recipients of his letter to the Romans to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and well pleasing to God. In other words, their worship is not to be merely spiritual. Followers of Christ cannot simply say their prayers with eyes closed and call it a day. For Paul and Jesus, worship is bodily. Faith is physical as well as spiritual. In order to please God, we have to present everything we have - body, mind and spirit. Not just our holy thoughts.

Are our bodies pleasing to God? What does God find acceptable in our physical being? Most of us spend a lot of time trying to make our bodies pleasing to the world, acceptable to some standards of grooming and fitness. We live in an extremely body conscious society. Do we ever stop to think what makes our bodies acceptable to God. I wonder if God likes this shirt I'm wearing? Does God think I need to lose a few pounds? I suspect God worries less about what our bodies look like and more about what we actually do with those bodies that God has so generally given to be, again quoting Paul, temples of the holy spirit.

Is God pleased when I consume too much food while others go hungry? Is God pleased when I consume too much polluting energy to move my body from point to point on the earth, or to keep my body at a comfortable temperature in the air conditioning? Is God pleased when my body wants to stay in bed another hour instead of getting up to pray? Is God pleased when I use the tongue in my mouth to grumble about my life instead of forming words of praise to the Almighty?

Many of us feel these twinges of guilt because we sense that our bodies and what we do with them are often not very pleasing in the eyes of God. We are not spiritual heroes like so many characters in scripture. I'm so inspired by the midwives, for example, in the reading from Exodus, Shiphrah and Puah, who risked their bodies, their bodily safety, in order to protect the bodies of newborn Hebrew boys. We lack the spiritual heroism of Simon Peter who in today's

Gospel is unafraid to utter with his tongue the words, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."

So if we often feel so unpleasing, so unpresentable to God in our bodies, how are we to heed Saint Paul's exhortation to present ourselves as a living sacrifice? I think a lot of us find ourselves praying for what I would call a Shiphrah and Puah moment, an opportunity to prove our goodness, to put our bodies on the line and make a difference. Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, they stopped the king's campaign of genocide. We've been reading the last few weeks about the patriarch Joseph, and with God's help, he foresaw a famine in the land and took necessary steps to save his people and the people of Egypt from starvation. I know many of you have been disturbed by the images of starving people in Somalia. I feel so helpless. My name may be Joseph, but unlike my spiritual ancestor, I cannot stop a famine. I can barely get my hand and the pen and checkbook all together to make a small donation for hunger relief sometimes.

Brings me back to this past week and my encounter with Ray, the needy traveler at our church door. I used some of the money that some of you have given to my discretionary fund to buy him a tank of gas. And I rummaged around in our kitchen for some ice and drinks and scraps of food, leftovers from our fellowship hour after church. And I know that it made a difference to Ray and his wife and their three dogs, but honestly, it didn't feel like much. I knew that after the tank of gas ran out, they would be in need again. I had not saved them. It was certainly not a Shiphrah and Puah moment. But it was a moment of some kind. When Ray presented his body in the doorway of the church, I don't think he intended it as a presentation like Paul talks about, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, an act of spiritual worship, although I did notice he removed his hat. He seemed to feel about as unpresentable as anyone I've ever met, but the willingness of a man who works for his wages to present his unpresentable self at the church door and ask for work and a prayer, it had a holiness about it.

There is something holy when we, unpresentable though we may feel, present ourselves anyway. There is something sacrificial when we show up even though we don't feel like it, even though we don't want to. There is something acceptable and pleasing to God when we lay aside our delusions of being dramatically helpful and just do what we can in the name of Christ. Paul goes on to say in this passage we read this morning that "For by the grace of God 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." It is not we who make ourselves presentable before God. God takes what we present and gives us the grace, gives us the measure of faith to do things that are pleasing.

And I can't explain why God seems to have given some people a greater measure of faith. I can't explain why there are spiritual heroes of scripture like Shiphrah and Puah and Peter and Joseph and the spiritual saints of our more recent history like Mother Teresa or Desmond Tutu, Dorothy Day and Oscar Romero. But then there are the rest of us who can barely get it together to perform some small act of love toward our neighbor. I do agree with the words of Mother Teresa, though, that we can do no great things, but only small things with great love. And I would add by God's grace.

In order to do anything at all, though, we have to be present. We have to present ourselves. We have to show up. So the fact that all of us are present here this morning, that we've shown up is proof that God is doing something in our lives. We may not feel like it. We may not have wanted to be here with our whole heart, body, mind and spirit this morning. We may have had a fight with our spouse or children before we came; we may have been watching some bad reruns on television; we may have done something we shouldn't have; we might have put too much butter on our toast or said something we shouldn't to someone we love before we came here this morning, but here we are. We are present, and that's grace. That's proof that we need not be conformed to this world, as Paul says, but that it is possible for us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We can discern how God is going to make us presentable.

Now, don't misunderstand me. We still have to work. We still have to look for those Shiphrah and Puah moments that grace throws in our path to be with our brothers and sisters, to keep them from being thrown under the bus and oppressed by the kings and the empires of this world. But we don't have to be perfect in order to be present. We must be present, though, if we want to be perfected.

One of my spiritual heroes is a 20th century Trappist monk named Thomas Merton. And before he was a monk, his life was so unpresentable, he had trouble finding a monastery that would even take him. And after he was a monk, he was still a sinner in many ways that he admitted. But he also wrote some of the most inspiring words about prayer and the life of a Christian that I've ever read. If anyone could say something about presenting their unpresentable bodies before God, it's Thomas Merton, so I close with a prayer that he wrote.

Let us pray: My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does, in fact, please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire, and I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always. Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.