

15th Sunday After Pentecost

9/13/2020

Romans 12:1-8

Organized Church

This last week, on Wednesday, I was blessed to see our Kindergarteners thru 6th graders return to in person learning. It's a blessing. A week or two ago, Mr. Larry Johnson and I and the faculty for the school were organizing Mrs. A.'s room and trying to space out desks to keep the 6ft of social distance for the kids. Seeing those desks brought me back.

Do you remember what it was like to have your own desk in school? For me, it was a similar flip up lid. And all your books and notebooks were kept in your desk. Some kids just had a pile of stuff in their desk and I don't think you could find anything. I, on the other, reveled in keeping my desk clean and organized. Everything had a place. Everything was neat. And right about now, my wife is saying to herself, "Well, what on earth happened to you and why aren't you more organized now?"

But really, I remember the simple joy of telling myself once a quarter, "Ok, today is the day to reorganize the desk and make it look good." There's something about being neat and organized that gets me. I like it when everything has a place. I like being able to easily find something when needed. There's a good feeling inside of us when we finally organize that thing that's been needed for a while. In fact, I encourage you to go organize a desk drawer or two today so that you can enjoy that nice sense of accomplishment. It's productive. It's good.

Our reading today reminds me of organization. Specifically, church organization. Church organization is not like desk organization. People don't always fit neatly next to each other like pencils in a pencil box. We can grate on each other. Irritate each other. Hurt each other. And this year of all years, it is very easy to get frustrated with each other over things like masks and then, as a consequence, to feel like we have no place at church. And so, the apostle Paul reminds us today of what makes an Organized Church. It starts with 1) Being United in Christ and 2) Fitting nicely next to each other.

Our sermon text today begins with Paul's words in Romans 12:1-2, *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."*

To worship God is not just about singing hymns and showing up to church on Sunday. That's corporate worship. That's a part of worship. But Paul reminds us that the very way we live our lives, the way we treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, that's worship of God too.

It would be entirely possible to live our lives in such a way as to not worship God. That's why Paul then writes, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." He's not telling Christians to be contrarian. He's not advising us to ignore government restrictions on businesses, religious institutions, or schools. When he says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world", what does he mean? Well, why don't we let him speak for himself:

"3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you." "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." Imagine that 2nd graders flip top desk. Imagine that the pens, pencils, erasers, books, notebooks, folders, and the rest are all thinking to themselves every day, "I am the most important! I need to be on top! I need to be visible, accessible, and prominent!" Imagine that every time the 2nd grader closes the lid on the desk, the pens, the pencils, the paper, and the rest all jockey for position. What would that 2nd grader see when she opens her desk next? Chaos. Disorganization. Disunity.

Is that what God sees in our church today? Certainly, when we are arrogant and boastful, when come to a Sunday worship service with the thought, "Aren't all these people lucky to see me today?", then our own selfishness will cause problems. But I find Paul's phrasing interesting. He is not trying to bash our self-esteem. He is not talking to Christians at the church in Rome or the church in Temecula to tell them, "You're worthless." The way that he finishes verse 3 is evident of that. But he says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought."

I think these days, when everything has shut down, including our normal church operations, it's especially easy to think, "I'm worthless." Perhaps you had an identity as someone who always put together church refreshments or maybe you did it occasionally, but it was a great way for you to get connected to your church family. Well, we haven't done that in over 6 months. Maybe you volunteered at school, helping kids learn to read or do math. Well, we haven't done that in over 6 months. Maybe you loved the discussion at Bible study and that was where your God-given insight into his Word was a blessing to the people around you. Well, your voice hasn't been heard in 6 months. No VBS. No Fall Festival. No Easter outreach, we'll see about Christmas. All these things, all these places where we had said for years, "This is me. This is what I do here," they're gone. And so maybe our problem isn't that we are thinking so highly of ourselves, but so low.

There's a little phrase in this text that I feel is easy to skip over. A little phrase that we need to hear once we realize that we have been arrogant. A little phrase that is so good to hear when we are feeling down. Paul says, "For by the grace given me..."

What we do have in common with each other? Different ages. Different life experiences. We're from different parts of the country. We're from different countries. Our interests in movies, and books, and TV shows vary wildly. Our hobbies are dissimilar. Our professions are different. Our education levels is different. You would think that a group like this would have no business getting together week after week. But the unifying thread in each of our lives is this phrase, "The grace given me."

Each and every one of us at one time or another needed to hear that we weren't all that we thought we were. Each us has been arrogant or boastful or prideful at some point in our lives. At other times in our lives, we needed to be lifted up. We were down, depressed, and saddened, and like Peter sinking into the Sea of Galilee, we needed our Lord's hand to shoot up and lift us up. The grace given us is the needle and thread which weaves in through our lives, connecting us, binding us together into a wonderful tapestry that tells the story of Christ. Each of us sinners. Each of us saved. Each of us crushed under the weight of this life. Each of us raised up to new life in Christ.

People today talk a lot about organized religion and decry it as a bad thing. Certainly there have been bad people who have used organized religions to abuse people. But when I look at the apostle Paul's

words today, I see the blessings of a church organized and united in Christ. And a church organized has its pieces fit together nicely.

Paul finishes our section of Scripture today by saying, *"4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."*

I don't know when we'll feel comfortable bringing back the coffee pot after church services again. I'm hoping that next year we'll bring back our volunteer intensive outreach activities. But when you read Paul's words here, don't we all suddenly find ourselves lost in a sea of opportunities at church? Each of us have a place at church. Each of us fit nice and snug next to each other. That's because each of us have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

And so, what has been your gift to this church body? What can gifts can you bring this family in 2020 when everything is tossed upside down and it feels like we are scrambling each month. Can you serve? Can you encourage? Can you give? Can you be a leader? Can you be compassionate to the person who is here today who just simply needs an ear or a shoulder or a hand? With as much negativity we have in our lives, can you be the optimist? Can you pick up chairs after church today? Can you meet with someone this week at a coffee shop? Can you text that person who hasn't been to church for a while and let them know that you miss them? Can you take a moment right now, ignore the rest of my sermon and say a prayer for the family in grief, in strife, in pain, or in need?

Yeah, things are different this year. Our normal places have all been rearranged, but we still serve an important function in this body of believers. Each of us. All of us. We are an organized church, organized by our unity in Christ, and organized to fit next to each other when we each need each other. May God bless you to open your eyes to see your important role by the grace he has given you. Amen.