

Living into the Questions: What Matters Most?  
Romans 12:1-2  
October 28, 2018  
First Baptist, Pottstown

One response that never carried any weight in our household growing up was the claim that “everybody else was doing it.” Whether it pertained to the kind of clothes we wore, the music we listened to, the places we wanted to go or the ideas we espoused, trying to convince my parents that my sisters and I should be allowed to do something simply because it was popular was a complete waste of time. Such an attempt was consistently met with a response akin to, “So if everyone was jumping off the roof, would you want to do that too?” No amount of moaning or cajoling would affect a different outcome; the statement that “everyone was doing it” mattered not at all.

As I think back on it, it wasn't that what we wanted to do was so very bad. I think my parent's response was a way to generate some reflection about *why* we wanted to engage this way. It was, I suppose, a way to suggest that we rethink our criteria: was it important to do or have because *others* were doing it or having it? Or did we want it for ourselves, because it reflected some interest or desire *we* wanted to fulfill. It wasn't a judgement of others' choices, but rather a way of focusing us to make a judgement about our *own* choices, about our *own* motivations and values. Was the object or event in question important to do or have because I thought it had *intrinsic value for myself*, or was it valuable simply because others said so?

In his letter to the church at Roman, Paul invites the kind of self-reflection that my parents invited. In this portion of Romans, he has been talking about the mercy of God. He reminded the folks of the basic trajectory of God's relationship with humanity: the call to life, our human

resistance, and our return to God and Gods' ways. The fact that we can, and do, return to God again, and again, Paul says, is because God is merciful; in light of that mercy then, our faithful response is to "present our bodies as a living sacrifice" so that ultimately, we might be not "conformed" but "transformed" in the light of God's love and thereby empowered to do "God's will."

Now this "living sacrifice" thing is a kind of a stretch for us but folks in the early church would have been familiar with the metaphor. Live offerings of small animals and birds were commonplace in ancient religious life so that part would not have generated a response; what might have gotten their attention was his emphasis on **presenting themselves** as a "sacrifice!" Paul loves the image of embodiment: believers embody the love of God, the redemptive work of Christ, the compassion of the Holy Spirit. For him, the Old Testament declaration that we should love God with all our "heart, soul, strength and mind" (Deut. 21) is brought to life in the way we live our lives. Our innermost values and motives, in Paul's estimation, are reflected in the ways we act, the choices we make, the commitments we give ourselves to, culminating in a literal "body of work" that becomes a reflection of ourselves and God's love. He's not saying that what we *do* leads to our salvation; rather, he's suggesting that **our salvation leads to what we do!** Redemption results in transformation! And transformation leads to understanding God's call for us. We are *ourselves* a living, breathing offering to God when we embody the values and priorities of the gospel.

As we worship together over the next several weeks we will be focusing on several questions that are designed to push us to think about ourselves as individuals and as this "body of Christ" together. Paul's words challenge us to consider a new or renewed understanding our

sense of call and purpose in this season of our life together. This transformation Paul talks about is the process of change that shifts our focus from *ourselves* to our *life together*, knowing that it is *in relationship with one another* that we embody the ministry, compassion and joy of this life to which we have been called. In Paul's estimation, "church" is not a noun but rather it's a **verb**! Church is *not a place to go* but it's a **dynamic organism to be**: it is nothing less than a "living offering" to God!

So how do we do that? How do we become the embodiment of God's generous Spirit? We begin with knowing ourselves, with knowing who we are and what we value. As I reminded you two weeks ago, God doesn't play holy hide and seek; "God's will" isn't some mysteriously hidden allusive thing waiting out there for us to find it. God has *already* planted in us the desires, passions, gifts, skills, longings, imagination, and potential for us to be the fullest expression of the body of Christ, a true "living sacrifice." Our task is to uncover it! Our job is to dream it! Our call is to embody it in such a way that it is clear, not only to ourselves but to the world around us, that we have been transformed!

In his book *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King, Jr. explores this notion of non-conformity. He argues that Paul isn't suggesting that we separate ourselves from the world, as some conservatives do. That would make us detached, disinterested in the very creation and society of which we are called to be apart. King also believes that we shouldn't be so immersed in the world that we acquiesce to its values; if we simply go along with whatever the dominate culture affirms as right, valuable and "good", then we miss the opportunity to bring light to the world, to be the "salt" Brother Eleazar spoke of last week. But rather King argues that what Paul envisioned was for us to position ourselves in such a way that we both can *love and change* the

world without separation or assimilation; that we embody this other place that allows us to witness to God's redeeming love and grace in a way that is prophetic and life-changing! King asks the church to be "maladjusted", transformed not conformed.

And it is in such a transformation that we find our purpose, according to Paul: "so that you can discern what is the will of God." Opening ourselves to God's merciful spirit, offering who we are, what we value and how we act as our "living sacrifice", our "body of work" as our "spiritual worship", we can be transformed by God's love and grace to reveal our unique place in God's realm for just "such a time as this."

We need to **ask and answer** the questions: Who are we? What do we value? How do we define and characterize ourselves? We need to **ponder and be able to say** to each other and to the wider community what matters most to us; what we would be willing to do and be, for the sake of God and for our life together. We need to **wonder** what lies at the very heart of why we are here, to **identify** the thing that compels us to continue, to **claim** what we would not give up for all the money in the world. Because **these** are the questions that will tell us most about ourselves. The answers to these questions lay the foundation for who and what we are yet to be. They tell us what is important to us; they tell us who is important to us. And they begin to point us toward what we might imagine we can be and do when we take ourselves and God seriously enough to risk transformation in the light and life of Christ.

Discovering God's will begins in discovering ourselves, as individuals and as the body of Christ together. If we are "doing church", giving to those in need, showing up, putting in our time simply because we always have, or because "everyone else is doing it", then we aren't here for the right reasons and we will have trouble figuring out why to stay. Neither Pottstown

nor God needs another 161 yr. old middle-class enclave of folks hiding out in a big stone building waiting for someone to wander in. Look around: there are replicas of us on literally every corner. King says “we must make history, not be shaped by it.” What would that look like in this place? At this moment? Will we be shaped by what has happened here or will we be transformed by it? Will this be the end or the beginning?

In Echo Hall you will see a large ‘kiosk’ in the center of the room; on it are four questions or statements waiting for your response. On the adjacent round table are sticky notes, paper, pens, markers, stickers for you to use to answer the questions and to “comment’ on other’s responses. Each week we will add a new kiosk, a new set of questions, although you will be encouraged to return to the previous ones as well. This is an important season in our life together: we need to interact and engage each other as we live into the questions that shape our future. There is not some magic answer out there; we are co-creators with God as we imagine what’s next! It’s an exciting time for this congregation; and everyone needs to claim their voice, stake their claim, dream a dream, share a vision of what it might look like, if all things were possible, to love and serve God in this place.

Because all things ARE possible; because we are recipients of God’s endless mercy. Because we can be transformed into anything in the love and mercy of God. Because we want to make history, not become history!