

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8.

Exodus 1:8-2:10 is a significant story because it both describes the reality of Israel's slavery under the Egyptians, and their refusal to simply passively acquiesce to that slavery. Rather, it traces how the people fought back against the empire when direct confrontation was not possible.

The story begins, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' Therefore, the Egyptians set taskmasters over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them" (Exodus 1:8-14).

A son of Jacob (Israel), grandson of Isaac and great-grandson of Abraham was Joseph. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt (as we examined over the past several Sundays). There, he had a vision from God of a severe famine that would come upon the known world. The ruler of Egypt, the Pharaoh, assigned Joseph the task of growing, storing and distributing grain in bounteous years so that there would not only be enough food in Egypt to see the country through the worst of famines, but would also allow them to become the breadbasket to the rest of the mid-East. To do this, Joseph was made second only to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Once the famine struck, Joseph had Jacob (Israel) and his children come to Egypt to live. So this large clan of twelve brothers, their families and their father left the Promised Land. And they settled in Egypt. There, this clan would live for the next 500 years, and there they would multiply and grow into twelve tribes.

Joseph died, as did his brothers. But the children of Israel continued to live in Egypt. Eventually, as the centuries passed, there came a pharaoh "who did not know Joseph". This passage is saying something quite profound. By using the words "who did not know Joseph", the author is stating that not only the pharaoh but his entire court had lost its corporate memory! It had forgotten the profound contribution that Joseph and the Hebrew people had made to the transition of their nation from being simply an independent state to becoming the political, economic and military center of the ancient world! And once they had lost their corporate memory, the Egyptians would no longer perceive the Israelites as those who had made significant contributions to the rise of the Egyptian nation to power and wealth. Rather, they would concentrate upon their differences (that they were of another race) rather than their commonalities (that they had built a successful nation together). The loss of corporate memory is the seedbed for prejudicial outlook and action, then acts of oppression and exploitation and finally the institution of pogroms against any people different than the persecutors. This is the pattern clearly developed in this scripture.

The first action resulting from the loss of corporate memory is prejudicial outlook and action. In the case of the Egyptians, the pharaoh “who did not know Joseph” (and the pharaohs who followed him, as well as their respective courts) “said to his people (that is, the Egyptian people), ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land’” (1:9-10). Acting to oppress or exploit people or groups different than us rarely happens without a perceived threat. And it is the exploitation of that threat by those either in power or seeking to gain dominance that enables them to gain the ascendancy in that society. In other words, those who are to be victimized must be perceived as a threat by the people. That perception occurs only if those in power can skew or even obliterate the corporate memory of the people in order to get from the people the reaction the powers want. Therefore, it is not that the people set out to oppress and exploit; rather, they will embrace the oppression or exploitation of the alien group because they have been frightened by “the powers that be” to scapegoat that people.

This can be seen clearly in the case of the initial actions that eventuated in the Jewish holocaust in Germany. The Jews had made a profound contribution to German life in the 19th century academically, economically and socially. But in order to build their power and to cement their control of the nation, the Nazis had to get the Germans to lose their corporate memory of such contributions; they did this by excoriated the Jews by blaming revolutionary actions the Nazis had conducted upon the Jews and thus replacing trust with fear. But by turning the Jews into a feared enemy, Hitler was able to divert attention from his takeover of the German government and the consequences that would mean for the future of the world. This is what Pharaoh and his court did in order to subjugate the Israelites.

The second action is acts of oppression and exploitation, where the victim people are not only targeted as objects of fear, but are both defeated as a viable political force and are used by the powers for the advancement of the powers’ own agenda. Pharaoh put it in terms of “acting shrewdly with them”. That shrewdness not only included bringing them under the dominance of the Egyptian army and military power, but by enslaving them to provide free labor for the advancement of the Egyptian economy (e.g., building their treasure cities of Pithom and Rameses). “The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor”. Likewise, the German Jews were incarcerated without trial in concentration camps where they provided slave labor to the German economy.

The final action is the institution of pogroms against the victims. Only their physical destruction can erase the perceived threat they are to maintaining the order and power of the nation. “But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, the more they (seemed to) multiply and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites”. The strategy the Pharaoh enacted to reduce the number of Israelites was to have all their male babies killed. If carried out over a significantly long time-period, this would have two very significant results. In several generations, no more Israelites would be born, because there would be no Israelites to father children. And, second, the children born to Israelite woman would, ipso facto (because there would be no Israelite men) be fathered by Egyptian men which, in turn, would “water down” the Israelite stock until it had become entirely Egyptian. This would be the “ultimate solution”, as

the mass extermination of Jews during the Second World War would be that generation's "ultimate solution".

We tend to think of the Israelites simply acquiescing to their domination by the Egyptian political, economic and religious elite. But, in reality, that was not the case. How much opposition occurred in the 400 years the Israelites groaned in slavery under the Egyptian yoke, we do not know. But at least in these opening words of the book of Exodus, there are two examples given of rather significant resistance on the part of the Israelites. The first example is that of two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. And the second is the birth-family of Moses.

The first story tells of the order by the Egyptian Pharaoh to Israel's two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all newly-born Hebrew boys while letting the girls live. "But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong" (1:17-20).

Because they "feared God", Shiphrah and Puah simply disobeyed Pharaoh. Told to kill the male babies, these midwives refused to do so. And then, when asked by Pharaoh why his plan was failing, they lied to him. Pharaoh accepted their explanation, and "the people multiplied and became very strong".

This is a classic case of civil disobedience! Shiphrah and Puah refused to follow the Pharaoh's orders and lied to cover up their defiance (they could not have openly defied the Pharaoh and lived). And God blessed their disobedience. Of course, this was only a temporary reprieve. Eventually, frustrated by the midwives, Pharaoh gave the order, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live" (Ex. 1:22). But Shiphrah and Puah had won a temporary reprieve that saved the lives of at least some Hebrew children.

Civil disobedience works best when those who are protesting are not politically powerful enough to successfully confront. Even though it is passively resistant, the power of civil disobedience is enormous. The witness to that was its use by Gandhi in eventually overthrowing the might of the British Empire in India – or even more clearly, its use by the civil rights movement as the means to win strategic political struggles in the South and to raise the consciousness of all the United States regarding our nationwide racism.

The second story of resistance in Exodus 1 and 2 is the rescue of the baby Moses by the daughter of Pharaoh. In this story, a baby boy was born to a Hebrew woman. But she knew of the pharaoh's order that all boy babies had to be thrown into the Nile. And she was not about to do that. So she made a waterproof basket for her son, put the baby in it, and then floated it down the Nile River, hoping someone would find it and rescue her baby.

The unmarried and childless daughter of Pharaoh came to the river to bathe. But she saw the basket and sent one of her attendants into the river to fetch it. She opened the basket and immediately fell in love with the baby. She said, "This will be my baby!" She gave the baby an

Egyptian name – “Moses” – which meant in the Egyptian language, “son”. But the same word also meant in the Hebrew language, “to draw out”. Thus, Moses, the son of Hebrew slaves, was “drawn out” of the Nile River and raised to manhood by an Egyptian princess!

But that’s not the real point of the story. The point of this story is to demonstrate how the seeds of Egypt’s spectacular defeat by Yahweh in the plagues and at the Red Sea were sown 80 years earlier through the sophisticated use of civil disobedience by a resisting Israelite family that took advantage of the naiveté of an Egyptian princess. The most important part of the story occurs after the rescue of the baby from the Nile.

“Then Moses’ sister (who was about eight years old at the time and had been following the basket) came out of hiding and said to Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?’ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Yes’. So the girl went and called the child’s mother. Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.’ So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son” (2:7-10).

The irony in this story – and the delight with which the Israelites must have repeatedly told it – is obvious. Pharaoh’s order has required all Israelite mothers of boys to kill their baby (by throwing him into the Nile). This mother has refused to do this, but instead increases his likelihood of rescue by placing him into a basket and floating it past the Pharaoh’s daughter. Thus, this mother has directly disobeyed the order of Pharaoh.

And what is her punishment for this disobedience? Why, she gets her baby back to nurse and to raise, protected by the command of Pharaoh’s own daughter. And not only can she now legally and under full protection raise the one who will later become the liberator of the Israelites from Pharaoh and Egyptian bondage. She even gets paid for it! And she gets paid for it from the purse of Pharaoh himself! This, too, is a form of civil disobedience. And in both instances, it is women who defeat Pharaoh at his own game.

This arrangement guarantees that Moses will have two homes. He will live in the palace and be treated as a son of Pharaoh (also playing with the real son who will someday be his opponent in God’s confrontation of imperial power); he will learn the ways of the Egyptian court and will know both their strengths and their vulnerabilities (including their great pride). But he will also be raised in the home of his birth-parents and learn both the ways of the Hebrews and the torture and ignominy to which they are subjected as slaves of the Powers of Egypt. Such an education almost guarantees a man who will both thoroughly understand the nature of power and will have a burning passion for justice that will eventuate in the demand to his brother (the new Pharaoh), “Let my people go!”

Psalm 124 is a most dramatic hymn, to be sung as the Jewish worshippers ascend Mount Zion to Jerusalem’s Temple. The worshippers sing together:

“If it has not been the Lord who was on our side” – let Israel now say – “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters” (124:1-5).

This psalm is divided into two stanzas, the first being verses 1-5 and the second being verses 6-8. The psalm itself is a communal hymn of thanksgiving for a dramatic deliverance from a significant peril. What that peril might be is not stated in the psalm, and determining that peril is pure conjecture. Some have suggested that it was Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem that was lifted by God’s miraculous deliverance through his angel of death (II Kings 19:14-37; Isa. 37:14-38). Others have suggested that the psalm reflects the effort of the Gentile leaders of Canaan to gut the work of the Hebrew people under Nehemiah as he led them to rebuild their walls (Neh. 4): But whatever might be the occasion, this psalm was written to praise God for his miraculous deliverance of the nation of Israel from almost certain annihilation of their capital city, Jerusalem.

Both stanzas use vivid images to describe the danger that Israel had been in. The first metaphor is that of a primordial monster whose voracious jaws were about to consume Israel and carry them to the world of darkness and evil (“they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us” vss. 2-3). The second metaphor is a raging flood, sweeping all of Israel before it (vss. 4-5). The final metaphor is of a hunter, seeking to capture birds by spreading a net in their flight pattern so that they become entangled and die (vss. 6-7). All three images are used to show the chaos, inundation and overwhelming destruction that these opponents of Yahweh and Israel have brought upon the nation.

But “if it had not been Yahweh who was on our side – let Israel now say – if it had not been Yahweh who was on our side, then they would have swallowed us up alive” (vss. 1-3). The salvation of Israel was not due to Israel’s actions or even the actions of a great leader. Israel was simply overwhelmed by the power that was threatening them. Their liberation came about purely because of God’s miraculous intervention on their behalf.

What is particularly significant about this psalm is the wording of the opening theme: “If it had not been Yahweh who was on our side”. Some translations get it wrong when they write something like, “Had not the Lord been on our side” (NLT, NEB, CCD). The New Revised Standard Version gets it right when it translates the line, “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side”. What the psalmist is seeking to say here is not simply to thank God for inserting God’s Self into their dilemma. It is much more powerful than that. What the Psalmist is doing here is to compare and contrast Yahweh with the other gods of the time. If it had been Ba’al, or if it had been Marduk, or if it had been Amon-Re who had been on Israel’s side, then they would have been defeated. But it was not Ba’al, Marduk or Amon-Re. It was Yahweh – and therefore their success was guaranteed. To get the full force of the Hebrew, substitute the name of other “gods” like “wealth”, “political and military power” and “values of greed, power and sex” for the words “the Lord” – and then you get what the author is seeking to say.

The psalm then concludes in its second stanza, “Blessed be Yahweh, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken,

and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of Yahweh, who made heaven and earth” (vss. 6-8). It is Yahweh who has rescued them. And who is Yahweh? He is the maker of heaven and earth. He is the Creator of the universe and of us, as well. And thus he is the God who is not only over the armies and stratagem of those who oppose Israel (that is, the God of history); he is also God over the primordial monsters of death or of evil, over the torrents and floods that would otherwise sweep Israel away (that is, the God of creation).

The spirit of this psalm is best caught in the traditional African-American response, “The Lord has brought me through thus far”. That refrain puts the focus of praise where it needs to be. It is God with us, for us, and in the midst of our struggles that “has brought us through thus far”. It is not our own effort or energy, nor is it the other “gods” in which we might believe (like America, capitalism, democracy or individuation). Successful living comes from humble living – the recognition that our triumphs, our victories and even our defeats are all orchestrated by God who will “bring us through thus far”. So we can join with the psalmist in declaring, “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (124:8)!

Matthew 16:13-20 brings to a close the first theme of the Gospel of Matthew – answer to the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?” The next passage, Matthew 16:21-28 (which we will study next Sunday) introduces the second primary theme of this Gospel – answer to the question, “What has Jesus come to do?” So let’s now examine the final answer to the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?”

Matthew 16 continues the message of faith and non-faith occupying the earlier chapters of this Gospel. The first story, 16:1-4, once again exhibits the unwillingness of the Pharisees and Sadducees to perceive and to respond to what God is doing in their midst. They cannot see what God is doing because they will not see. They ask for a sign (16:1), but they will not allow themselves to see the clear sign God keeps giving them through Jesus (16:4). They are not people of faith.

Likewise, the disciples are people of “little faith” (the words indicate that the disciples have some faith, but lack imagination). In the next story (16:5-12), the disciples are unbelievably obtuse about what Jesus is teaching. This is because they are being so literalistic they are missing the nuance of what he is saying. They are taking him literally (“beware the bread of the Pharisees”) rather than truthfully (“the teaching and actions of the Pharisees”). They are trying so hard to please Jesus that they are not thinking for themselves and thus exhibit the capacity to think outside their paradigms. Therefore Jesus, in love, calls them “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive” (16:8-9a)?

It is in the light of the refusal to see (the Pharisees) or lack of imagination to see (the disciples) that the next step takes place. And the next story is one in which Peter finally sees – Peter finally thinks outside the parameters set by current Jewish theology, and voices for the disciples the new reality that he finally confesses.

“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 you – who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'" (6:13-16)!

"Who do the people say I am?" "Who do you say I am?" Here are the ultimate questions. Jesus first asks them to report what they have heard from others. That indicates how much in touch with the people they actually are; are they listening and taking note of what others believe? You cannot lead the people to greater truth or action unless you are keenly listening to them and consequently beginning where they are. In this case, they do not yet see Jesus as Messiah or Son of God. But they have speculated that this man is more than simply another miracle worker or another prophet. Anyone who can feed 5,000 or walk on water must be one of Israel's former great men, restored back to life. So, the people are suggesting that this Jesus is, in reality, John the Baptist (who has now been beheaded by Herod Antipas), Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. To bring the people to any other conclusion, one will need to begin where they are. And we only know where they are by listening to them.

"But you – who do you say that I am?" The Greek used here is particularly interesting. The NRSV translates the passage, "But who do you say that I am?" But that translation doesn't capture the power of the original Greek. Matthew does two things in writing this sentence. First, he uses the living historical present tense, something that English doesn't have. Jesus "says" to them; the statement is alive, demanding, requiring an answer. This sentence is designed to place an immediacy to the question – you must answer it and you must answer it now! Everything both for you personally and for the future of Jesus' mission depends on your answer.

The other thing the sentence does is emphasize the "you". The word *hymeis* means "you, in particular", "you emphasized". "Who do *you* say I am?" Not, what do others say. Not, what do you report. Not what are you commencing to start to begin to tentatively suggest! "Who do you say I am?" An answer is required. To capture in English the insistent nature in these Greek words, many translators have translated the line as "But you – who do you say that I am?"

And Simon Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" And by speaking those words in tentative, almost fearful belief – but still fully in belief, Peter has articulated for the disciples the thought that they had scarcely dared to allow themselves to believe. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Son of the living God!

Dale Bruner shares the Hawaiian Pidgin translation of Peter's response – a translation that gets at the very heart of what Peter had confessed. "Simon Peter say, 'You da Christ Guy, da Spescho Guy God Wen Send, Da God who alive fo real kine, you his Boy!'"¹

"You God's Boy!" Bruner then continues, "According to Matthew, Jesus is the Christ, whether Peter fully knows what he is saying or not. Jesus is It – but It, we will soon learn, in a way that neither the world nor Israel (nor, perennially, even the church) will think appropriate. *How* Jesus is the Christ will have to be worked out painfully until, finally, the explanation is nailed to wood!"²

¹ From *Da Jesus Book* as quoted by F. Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 122.

² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

In his confession of faith, Peter has actually used three titles for Jesus. He is the Messiah, the long anticipated king of the House of David. He is the Son of Man, the future world judge predicted by the prophets. And he is “the son of God”, the living incarnation and presence of God upon the earth right here, right now! He is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, God’s past, present and future in the real world! This is the confession Peter had made.

A word needs to be said about Peter’s definition of Jesus as the Messiah. The image of Messiah, of course, is found throughout the prophetic literature of the Jews (e.g., Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-9, 45:1, 40-55; Jer. 23:5-6; Ezek. 34:23-24; 37:22-25; Daniel 9:25-26; Micah 5:2-5; Haggai 2:21-23, 6:9-14; Zech. 9:9-10), most often associated with a great king who was yet to come to set Israel free from external tyranny. Further, the Hebrew word *mashiach* (translated into English, “messiah”) or “anointed one” was simply the title of every king of Israel and Judah, much as “Pharaoh” was the title for the Egyptian monarch and “Caesar” was the title for the Roman emperor (far too many references to list). Finally, the concept of a messianic expectation of liberation from tyranny is replete throughout post-Biblical literature (Enoch 37-71; II Esdras; II Baruch; Psalms of Solomon 17:21, 18:6-9).

The fact is that Jesus rarely used the title of himself, and rarely allowed others to use it for him. And the likelihood for his paucity of use was that by Jesus’ time the term had come to take on meaning that would divert his followers from Jesus’ actual intended purpose. Hatred of Roman dominance was so great by Jesus’ time that the word “messiah” had come to mean almost exclusively a political/military revolutionary who would overthrow and defeat the Romans, and create and maintain an independent Israelite state. The word had become almost totally devoid of its original spiritual dimension of the Messiah being God’s “anointed one” filled with God’s Spirit and working for the full restoration (spiritual, social, economic as well as political) of Israel into God’s *shalom* community. In fact, the word had become by Jesus’ time almost counter-productive, requiring more explanation than it was worth. This was seen in Peter’s later response to Jesus when he chastised Jesus for suggesting that the Messiah would suffer and die. Therefore, Jesus simply avoided use of the word.

But Jesus does allow it to be used in this context, for Peter has coupled it with the words (and concepts) of “You are the Son of the living God!”

The point of Peter’s confession is that Peter finally gets it! Peter finally understands, articulates and confesses that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”! And this is the first time such a confession has been heard from the mouth of a disciple.

“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 loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah” (16:17-20), understandably so, because if the term was used of Jesus, misunderstanding would be inevitable!

Jesus is delighted! Simon now understands who Jesus is. It may be that this will require some redefinition of the term “messiah” for Simon and the other disciples, and much demonstration on the part of Jesus of the ministry to which they are called as disciples of the messiah – but Simon has taken the first crucial step. He has confessed Jesus as Messiah and Son of the living God!

Now comes the reward. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! I tell you, you are (now) 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” (vss. 18-19).

There is a play on words in this passage which is crucial to understand. The name “Simon” meant, “God has heard”. Thus, “God had heard” Simon’s confession of faith. Now, through Jesus, God changes his name to “Peter” which means, “the rock”. Jesus, in essence, is saying in this passage, “You were Simon – “God has heard”. Your confession of me now shows me that you have, indeed, heard and thus you have become Petros – “the rock”. And it is upon this rock (petra) of your confession that I will now build my shalom community.” Thus, from here until the close of the Gospel of Matthew (and then, throughout the history of the church), this big fisherman would no longer be known as Simon but as Peter or Simon Peter. For upon his confession of Jesus as God’s anointed one and as God’s only Son would the church be built.

Romans 12:1-8 signals the major shift of the book of Romans from theology to ethics, from right thinking to right actions. And Paul makes that transition through a most magnificent statement.

“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” (Rom. 12:1-2).

If all Paul has written to this point in Romans is true, then what is the right response? The right response is “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”.

Whether these Roman Christians were formerly Jews or Gentiles, both groups know about their worship being centered in sacrifice. If any were Jews, their entire worship of Yahweh was built around the sacrificial system in which Temple worship was centered in providing burnt offerings of meat or grain, doves or fruit, to God as their “spiritual worship”. Likewise, if these Christians were former pagans, then whether they worshipped Roman or Greek gods or were of a mystery religion, that religion was centered around the provision of sacrifices to those gods at their respective temples. So Paul is calling them to Christian discipleship from out of the context of what they knew – their former religious practices.

All Christians, Paul is stating here, are called “to present their bodies as a living sacrifice”. The words used by Paul would automatically create a cognitive dissonance on the part of the readers, almost a contradiction in terms (like “jumbo shrimp” which literally means “big little”). A

sacrifice, by its very nature of being a sacrifice, is dead. To sacrifice something is to kill it – whether it would be the slaying of an animal or a bird, the harvesting and burning of grain or the plucking of fruit. By any of those acts – slaying, harvesting, plucking – one is killing that object. The offering that makes the sacrifice a sacrifice is the surrender of the object – the surrender of its life (which can no longer benefit it) and then surrendering that sacrificed life over to the god. Therefore, to speak of a “living sacrifice” was a contradiction of terms for anyone raised in either the Jewish or Gentile worship context.

But what Paul is saying here is that one is “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice”. Dramatically reversing the imagery, Paul is stating that what is precious to God is not a dead animal or fruit but a living person who consecrates the remainder of his life to living out Christ’s love and practicing his Christian faith in the world. Authentic Christianity, Paul is declaring, is the living of redemptive love in the world, consecrating mind and soul and heart and strength to serve not one’s own objectives, but to serve Christ and His Kingdom. This is authentic worship!

The word Paul uses here that is translated worship is *latreia*, the noun of *latreuein*. *Latreuein* actually meant “to work for hire or pay”. It is the exchange of your skill, your bodily strength, your intellectual capacity for the pay that the employer would give to you. It is a negotiated action in which both employee and employer participate (“I agree to do this for you if you pay me that amount of money”). *Latreuein* was never used for slave labor; it requires, instead, mutual agreement. Therefore, it was used for “that to which a person would give his life”. Because it was used of one’s vocation or “calling” in life, it evolved into the “serving of the gods” or “worship”.

But Paul also states in this passage that his appeal to us Christians to worship God in such deliberate ways should be done because of “the mercies of God”. The doctrine of grace that Paul had so carefully presented in Romans chapters 3 through 11 was presented, Paul now reveals, so that we can live out God’s grace pouring through us through our love for the poor and needy and our commitment to the powerless and oppressed in a sinful world (cf. Luke 10:36-37).

So Paul is stating here that our calling in life, as Christians, is to center our work, our life, and our entire purpose in the service of God – body, soul and mind – and to do this through our service of humanity through our political, economic, social and spiritual involvement. “Whatever you do”, Paul is in essence saying, “do it for Christ and His Kingdom!” Such action on our part is our worship which is “holy and acceptable to God”. For authentic worship is the offering of our everyday work for justice, equity and engagement of the world to God.

Paul furthers his argument by writing, “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” (vs. 2).

The Greek word translated “conformed” is the word *suschematizesthai*, from which we get the word “scheme” or “the creation of a temporary plan of action or program” (sometimes suggesting that there is something crafty or secret or hidden about that plan). Whereas the NRSV translates this phrase “do not be conformed to this world”, other translations try to capture the unique nuance of this virtually-untranslatable Greek word by phrases such as “do not

conform to the pattern of this world” (NIV), “do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you” (Jerusalem Bible), or “don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it” (The Message). In essence, what Paul is saying is “If you are going to be a living sacrifice for God, working to transform the world into Christ’s kingdom, then don’t allow yourself to be seduced by the priorities, standards and assumptions of this world. Life isn’t about building one’s own power. He who dies with the most toys doesn’t win. Success and achievement and admiration are not the standards to which we should give our lives. Don’t get “sucked-in” by this world.”

Rather, “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”. The Greek word translated “transformed” is equally intriguing. *Metamorphousthai* means “the ultimate change that creates the essential shape” of something. Obviously, it is the word from which we gain the English word, “metamorphosis” which means “to undergo systemic change” which, once occurring, can never be reversed (e.g., a caterpillar to a butterfly). This is captured in the same translations of the Bible which we previously examined. Thus, the NRSV translates the phrase, “be transformed by the renewing of your minds”, the NIV translates it the same way, the Jerusalem Bible translates it, “let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind”, and the Message states it, “fix your attention on God because you’ll be changed from the inside out.” That is, God has not done a cosmetic change on you (*suschematizesthai*); God has done a life-changing and irreversible transformation of you (*metamorphousthai*) so that you have come out of your conversion experience, not with a body tuck here or there, but as a totally new creation that is called to center one’s life on “what is good and acceptable and perfect” to God!

This, then, is our mission – to work for Christ and His kingdom by giving our lives to the living out of the Shalom Community. This is truly authentic worship. But how do we actually carry out that mission? That is what Paul addresses in verses 3-8.

“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 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” (vss. 3-8).

How does the Christian family work together for Christ and His kingdom, living out our Shalom community by our engagement in the political, economic and spiritual life of our nation and city, as well as in the life of the church? We carry out that mission in two ways, Paul suggests in today’s Epistle lesson, and the two ways are integrated into each other.

First, we practice living out the Shalom community by the relationship we foster with one another in the church. “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think”. Do not have an exalted or unrealistic perception of yourself. You are less important than you think you are – especially within the Body of Christ. If you center upon your own conviction of your exalted worth in the church, then you will not appreciate the roles everybody else has but will see

yourself out of proportion to the others. You are a part of a team and not its star! Not even Paul is a star! The only star should be Jesus. Whatever is your role on the team, you play it and play it to the best of your ability.

“Think with sober judgment (about yourself).” Know yourself; have an honest assessment of your own capacities and your own abilities, and don’t overextend yourself (an exhausted Christian helps nobody’s mission). Accept yourself and who you are. And accept the gift or gifts you have been given, neither taking pride in them nor minimizing them. You are who you are. And you are exactly the person with the capabilities and the attitude that God needs in the place to which God has assigned you. So embrace that place, and work diligently within it.

The important reality is to see the Church as one body, and each of us members as filling a particular niche within that body. “For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (vss. 4-5). As William Barclay so beautifully puts our task, “Paul is here saying that a Christian must accept himself; and even if he finds that the contribution he has to offer will be unseen, without praise and without prominence, he must make it, certain that it is essential and that without it the world and the Church can never be what they are meant to be”.³

In the light of what Paul has written about the importance of realistically seeing your place within God’s kingdom and seeking to be faithful in filling that position as fully as possible, the apostle then goes on to talk about the importance of that specialty.

“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” (12:6). The work to which God assigns us as part of the work of the church to live out the Shalom community upon earth is based, not upon our choice of what we would like to do nor upon God’s arbitrary choice of what we are to do. Instead, that assignment is made based upon the gifts with which God has endowed us.

The Greek word translated “gifts” is the word, *charisma*. We talk of the “charisma” of a person. But the English use of the word “charisma” misses the point of the Greek. In English, “charisma” means the dynamism with which some of us are filled. Some people have charisma (sex-appeal, dynamism, attractiveness) and some of us do not! Some of us are stallions and some of us are bell cows. So we celebrate the people who have “charisma” and wish we had some, as well.

But the Greek word *charisma* means “the gift of God”. That is, our charism is the particular capacity or ability given us by God for the building up of the life of the church or the carrying out of that life in mission to the world. Paul names some of those charisms in today’s Epistle lesson. Some of us are called and gifted by God to be “prophets” – that is, those appointed by God in the church to speak truth to power. Some of us have the gift of *diakonia* (from which we get the word, “deacon”), called to provide practical, caring service to people both within and outside the church. Others have the charism of teaching, assuming the responsibility of expositing the scripture and to explain our acting out of God’s call. Still others have the gift of

³ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia, PA.: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 160.

exhortation – that is, preaching the gospel – again both to believers and unbelievers. Others have a ministry of money; that is, God has given them much of the world’s goods, but that is for the purpose of being both stewards of that wealth and to redistribute that wealth in order to enable the church to more effectively work for the spiritual, social, economic and political transformation of the world. Still others have the gift of leadership, but like Jesus, the ultimate task of leaders is always to build the leadership potential of others. Finally, Paul tells the reader that a key charism of church people is compassion – simply caring for people and helping them realize that they are not alone in this dark world!

These are the gifts that Paul lists in this chapter in Romans. But he shares other gifts in other passages. In I Corinthians 12, for example, he adds to the above list the charisms of “wisdom” (that is, truth-telling), “knowledge” (that is, teaching truth), “faith”, “gifts of healing”, “working of miracles”, “discernment of spirits” (that is, the gift of reflecting and weighing what others say, and then speaking to it), “tongues” and “interpretations of tongues”.

In I Corinthians, Paul concludes his examination of spiritual gifts with the reminder, “All these gifts are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” (12:11-13a).

Whether Paul is writing as he does here in Romans about God’s call to us to work for the Shalom community in the Roman world or in I Corinthians about the interior “body-life” of the church, what Paul is essentially seeking to communicate is this. It is not about you! It is about Christ! It is not about whom you are or the gifts you might have or the strategic place you might hold in the church. That is all as nothing. It is about God, God’s formation of the church, God’s vision of the Shalom community for all humanity, God’s call to Christ to initiate that kingdom through his life, death and resurrection, and God’s creation of the church to work for that shalom in the political, economic and religious life of the society into which God has placed it. It is all about God! So step away from the center you never did occupy and accept your rightful place at the foot of the cross, there to worship and to be used by God as God determines, so that the Cross might be lifted high and all the world drawn to the One who is making all things new!

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