

Sermon: 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Romans 11:33 – 12:8 (vv.1, 2a)

Theme: We offer our lives to serve God and to serve our neighbour

Goal: Motivated by God's mercy, we serve God and our neighbour with our whole life and gifts.

Dear Friends,

Introduction:

When I was a youth leader in Brazil in my 20s, we organized a National Youth gathering under the theme: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.” The goal was to challenge the young people not to follow the pattern of the world, going astray from the true pattern of God's Word, but to renew their minds according to God's will by God's grace. – The challenge is still the same for us now!

I – We offer our bodies as a living sacrifice

In chapter six of Romans Paul had written: “Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:13, 14). Now Paul reinforces his appeal and adds a very important reason for what he is pleading: “by God's mercy”: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.”

In the chapters preceding the text, Paul describes the mercies of God as they are demonstrated in the redemptive work of Christ. He

reminds us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (8:1), and that nothing in heaven, on earth, or beneath can separate us from God's love in Christ (vv.38-39). Such mercy calls for a response (Series A p. 196).

Chapter 11 marks the end of the doctrinal section of the book of Romans. In chapters 12 to 15, Paul moves on to practical implications of what he has said. What God has done must be translated into action in the lives of those who have experienced his salvation in Christ... Because of what God has done for us, or what Paul calls God's mercy (described in chapters 1 to 11), the best we can give to him is our selves, by presenting our bodies as living sacrifices. The offering of the living bodies of believers as sacrifices contrasts with the Old Testament offerings of dead animals. Here the word 'body' represents far more than just our belongings or our money. It means the totality of our life, plans and activities. The offering of ourselves is a spiritual act of worship that we can give to God. Through our bodies we express what we think, what we have and how we live (ABC p. 1368).

II – We are members of Christ's body

Paul goes further in his argument. He uses the illustration of a human body. When we give ourselves to the Lord, we don't belong to ourselves anymore. As a matter of fact, we have never been our own owners; we were sold to sin. Now that Jesus rescued us for a new life, we belong to Him, to His body, as members of His body. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not have all the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others." *Believers must learn to live side by side. The first thing we must watch out for is pride. Because we are all equal before God, no group or individual*

can claim to be better than others. We are all saved by grace through faith. Pride undermines unity in the church (ABC p. 1369).

III – We serve according to our gifts

As the various parts of the body have different functions and abilities, so it is with the members of the church. God gives different gifts to each of us to serve Him and to serve our neighbour. Paul has several lists of gifts in his letters. Not one of them claims to be complete; but they are interchangeable. If you don't find your gift in the current list, don't worry; God has a job for you in His kingdom. What matters is that you are a redeemed child of God by faith in Jesus and that you offer yourself as a living sacrifice to Him.

Let's go through the various gifts Paul mentions in this text. I think that you will fit in one or more of these gifts:

“If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.” Prophesying is proclaiming God's word. It's not necessary to speak about new revelations and about the future. God's Word speaks about the past, the present and the future. Prophesying is, strictly speaking, the gift God gives to the ministers of the Word. Pastors are not just “managers”, or “professionals”, but we have a call to faithfully proclaim God's Word.

“If it is serving, let him serve.” Serving has to do with any kind of work the church needs: welcoming, helping others, cleaning, making coffee and tea, preparing the Lord's Supper, bringing flowers, getting a braai ready, gardening in the church plot... and so on, according to our Duty Roster and other opportunities we have. Serve with gladness, not as an obligation.

“If it is teaching, let him teach.” Pastors need a special gift of teaching. But we have other teachers in the church: parents and grandparents teach their children by words and deeds. And, of

course, the Sunday School teachers. How important it is to teach the little ones for the way of Jesus!

“If it is encouraging, let him encourage.” Some people have a special gift to encourage others. Even the pastor needs encouragement! To encourage someone sometimes just takes a smile, a kind word, a brief note: *“I’m praying for you...”* counselling, visiting...

“If it is contributing to the needs of others, let him be generously.” We have many opportunities to exercise this gift, and St. Thomas is reacting well. It can always be better, “generously”; and this is a challenge for us. Our money doesn’t belong to us alone; it’s God’s money. Let us manage it in the best way for the needs of our family and for the needs of the church.

“If it is leadership, let him govern diligently.” This is a special appeal to the Elders and chairs of the Ladies Guild, Sunday School and other departments or committees. If someone is elected, he shall do his duties with high responsibility.

“If it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.” As God showed mercy on us, we shall show mercy on the others as well with cheerfulness.

Conclusion: Look, to offer our body as a living sacrifice to God is not just a matter of performing some duties. If my whole body, mind and life don’t belong to Christ, serving will be a burden. Or, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, if I have no love... I am nothing. But, thank God, God’s mercy works powerfully in us and moves us to live according to His will. And if we don’t achieve the goal 100%, we have to be humble, ask for forgiveness, and try again, doing it better and better. The hymn *“Take my life...”* we sing now is a consecration prayer. Let’s sing it in a spirit of prayer. May God help us to love Him with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind; and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 24 August 2014