

**Background:** For a few weeks we will be reading and preaching from Paul's letter to the Romans. We start today by reading Romans, Ch. 12, which is the turning point of the letter. The letter is really a sermon. To oversimplify a bit, Chapters 1-11 is all about God who through Jesus Christ gives faith through grace. In a world where "sin abounds" Paul proclaims that the grace of God abounds more abundantly. This is the amazingly good news of the gospel. Then Paul appeals to us to live out that good news as the church of Jesus Christ. Here we pick up...

**Romans 12:1-8**

12:1 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.

12:2 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.

12:3 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.

12:4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,  
12:5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

12:6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;

12:7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;

12:8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**Proclamation of the Word**

I keep seeing gyms popping up by the name of CrossFit. I know some of you are experts at this intense exercise training program. I have seen your Facebook photos! At first when I saw the name CrossFit on a store front, I assumed it was a new church start-up with a trendy name.

CrossFit would be a great name for the church for we are being reshaped and formed into the image of the cross of Jesus Christ. We the church are becoming CrossFit through the exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit when we humbly use them to serve the mission and ministry of God. Paul would approve, I think, of us being a CrossFit community of believers, the church of Jesus Christ.

If the first 11 chapters of the Book of Romans is the WHY we worship God, then the next section is HOW we worship God. The Worship of God has to do with the 3R's. No, not Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic. It is Redemption, Reconciliation, and Response. By God's grace we have been redeemed. By God's grace we have been reconciled to God and through Jesus to one another. So we respond with sacrificial worship. As the school year begins, it is good to go back to the basics, the 3 R's.

The Roman church apparently had a UNITY problem. Yes, there was trouble in river city, or as we know it now, Vatican City. The First church of Rome was made up of Jews and Gentiles. Jewish Christians saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the promised messiah, but non-Jewish Gentiles were also coming to faith in Jesus. We cannot even imagine the gap between these two groups of believers. Culture was extremely different. Conflict was deep. The Jews had been cast out of Rome and persecuted as much as Christians in general had. These Jews were now returning to Rome. The Gentiles and Jews are not getting along in the church.

A contemporary example:

There was a recent TIME article concerning the great conflict in Iraq between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, not to mention extreme radical and terrorist group ISIS persecuting anyone not like them, especially Christians. All are sect of Islam. Paul trying to help Jews and Gentiles live together as Christians would be like these groups in Iraq trying to getting along and worship, let alone live, together today. It seems impossible.

That is why Paul starts with what God has done first in the crucified and risen Christ. He tells both groups, "...[22](#); for there is no distinction; [23](#)for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24](#)being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;...." (Romans 6:22b-24)

Paul writes, here is your unity. It is Jesus.

Today the church is rent with division, and Paul's words are a helpful reminder. He writes about getting along with enemies, dealing with government, and the BIGGIE, wait for it, dealing with disputes over menus at the church suppers. (see Romans 14:1-8) YES! The dispute was over those who choose by faith to be vegetarians and those who were meat eaters. He concludes, "whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." We have unity because we all belong to the Lord.

Paul is always reminding the faithful of the big picture. In one cousin denomination, the hot divisive debate is over communion practices. The issue is over using trays to serve or whether intinction, or as I like to call it "rip and dip," communion is ok. Needless to say our own church has always had disagreements if we read our church history. My entire life in the Presbyterian Church has been marked by controversy over social issues. Those differences have been highlighted recently with controversy over marriage and divestment from 3 US companies doing business in Israel.

When these difficult issues hit, and they always do, some of us turn into "functional atheists." Some flee and separate. Some continue the fuss and fight with those with whom they disagree. Others celebrate quietly or lay low. I say we become "functional atheists" because we think we are in charge, and we forget to trust that this is God's church.

Sin deceives us into thinking it's all up to us. We start to act like the church ultimately depends on us redeemed sinners rather than the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is Lord of the church. And the Holy Spirit gives us gifts to serve together. God has been, is, and will be faithful to His church.

We are called like Abraham and Sarah, mentioned earlier in Romans, to trust as we go forward in faith.

After all isn't that what FAITH is? Trusting the promises of God. This passage is helpful and instructive to us today.

Paul reminds the church in Rome and Fort Hill Church in Clemson, that God has redeemed us through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead showing God's love for all people. Jew and Gentile, Jew and Greek, Slave and free, male and female, these were the divisions in Paul's day as we read in the New Testament. Our current divisions are described by the "Statement of Faith" of the *Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association* describes this world in which we live; it is, the statement says,

*an age when the church is caught up in the evil and sin of persecution,  
unrighteous name calling,  
trial and judgment,  
and sectarian division;  
... an era when the world is bent on warring factions, seeking "ethnic cleansing," fueled by  
segregation and divisiveness, built upon casting out the different and working for disharmony.*

But we also believe that God is redeeming and reconciling us. We are called to respond. Because we have been reconciled to God, we have a call to be reconciled to each other and build up the Body of Christ visible in the world.

Did you hear how Paul begins today?

According to the NIV translation, "in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifice." Always in light of what God does first, namely showing mercy, we are to respond in faithful, full-bodied worship. Now I do not think Paul is using the word "body," just to note our physical, bodily worship. Paul is a Jew. A Jewish understanding of the body is that it is all of us, everything. We are to offer our very lives: heart, mind, soul, and body. We are to be "all in". Our worship is not just what we do each Sunday morning as we gather, it is how we conduct our daily lives. We are to be CrossFit people who live our whole lives together in God.

And we are called to humbly serve God's purposes together offering the gifts God has given us. These last couple of weeks, we have witnessed the protests and unrest in Ferguson, MO where an unarmed black teen was shot. The situation highlights that we certainly have more work to do on race relations in all parts of our country. The church has spoken out, but also clergy and Christians have put their bodies on the line placing themselves between angry crowds and armed National Guard and police.

Persons of faith peacefully protest or seek to calmly talk to agitated protesters, exemplifying the grace of God in the form of such gifts that Paul describes: encouragement, mercy, leadership, serving, for instance. Offering our bodies as living sacrifice can be dangerous, but transforming. The presence of people of faith helped crowds in Ferguson to calm down.

Inside the church, such grace is surely needed, too. Make no mistake, unity, is not a fluffy, feel-good idea. It is faithfully serving our common Lord in the midst of trouble, differences or challenge. But unity, like faith, is a gift of God's grace. In a world where people like to shout at each other, "We're number one." The church of Jesus Christ declares, "We are one."

Unity does not look like uniformity though. There is a difference in unity and uniformity. The whole New Testament is a witness to God's covenantal love spreading beyond the bounds of the Jewish faith to include all whom the Lord calls. That is also why the whole New Testament is about healing divisions and spreading the good news of Jesus. Each letter is sent to each church to address some kind of issue the church is struggling with. And in our tradition, our *Book of Confessions*, include ways the church throughout the ages has discerned the will of Christ in its own day and time. The church of Jesus Christ includes old and young, rich and poor, disabled and abled persons, red and blue, male and female, weak and strong. We are unified under the banner of Christ. We proclaim, "We are one." Not "We're number one." Rather than seeing winners and losers. I am right, you are wrong, we see the Body of Christ, the church, sharing its gifts through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today we give thanks for Rodney Norris and his 13 years of shared ministry with us. He has used his gifts in service to God, to build up the church. And now he goes to a new call, to develop in new ways as Pastor of the Rogersville church. Even though his address will change, we know that we will still be one in Jesus Christ.

God's love poured out for us is the love we offer and share. We are interdependent and are called to show mutual kindness and respect. This is our spiritual worship. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. We exercise our gifts in service to God and allow God to shape us into the "CrossFit" church of Jesus.

So what if we see each other not through the lens of race, gender, economic status, liberal/conservative, but as those who serve God, living Christ-like lives? What if we see each other as those who have gifts and a heart for God and neighbor rather than where we disagree over matters?

If you enter my office, you will see one of my favorite pieces of pottery called "Circle of Friends." It was handmade in Mexico and has what looks like Mayan people surrounding a candle. When you turn the lights out and light the candle, the shadows dance on the ceiling. The little circle of friends look like they are dancing together. Each person's arms are wrapped around those beside him. One arm is supporting the other person and the other arm is resting on the other person. Both supporting and

being supported, the circle of friends is gathered around the light and love of Jesus Christ represented by the candle.

I pray that our church be a reflection of God's love and light.

May we be formed into the cross-shape image of Christ.

And may the Holy Spirit transform us into a CrossFit church, exercising our gifts, developing our strengths, and showing the power of God's love to the whole world.

Laura Smith Conrad  
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### **Prayer for Thanksgiving Rodney**

God when you created the world you said, "It is good!" We believe that the day you created Rodney you smiled and said the same thing. We thank you that he always reminds us that, "we are your children and you love us, no matter what." We thank you that for a season of 13 years you knit our lives together in grace and love. Thank you for every late night text that he answered, every game of Underground church, every prayer partner picnic, and every mission trip, youth conference, or retreat. We have shared laughter and tears together, and now we send Rodney, Nina, and Catherine off on a new adventure of serving you and telling others about the love of God in Jesus Christ. So guide us and guide the Norris family as they venture forth like Abraham and Sarah in faith, trusting your promises to be true for us all. Thank you that we are one through the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. And all God's children say, AMEN.