

Scripture Lesson: Romans 12:1-8

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 151

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship.

² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. 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. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Video Clip: *Happiness for Beginners: Teamwork*

Romans 12:1-8

08/16/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"HFB2: Teamwork – You're Gonna Learn It!"

Rev. Amy Terhune

This week, we continue our sermon series using the book "Happiness For Beginners" by Katherine Center, with short clips from the subsequent movie release of the same name that came out a few years back on Netflix. If you missed last week, that's okay. The sermons can stand on their own independently, although all will focus in some way on experiencing the deep joy of meaningful living.

To recap briefly, *Happiness for Beginners* tells the story of Helen Carpenter who, recovering from a divorce, decides to go on an intense wilderness hike in order to challenge herself to step outside of her comfort zone and find her own spirit again. But others are out in the wilderness for self-discovery as well. They're all searching for that elusive happiness that buoys us even in the worst of times. In today's clip, we met Sue, who is taking a vow of silence to deepen her spirituality and reflect on things more intensely. Her story resonates with me because I know how hard it can be live out the things I challenge myself to grow into. Sometimes, we all need to go out in the woods and scream, right? We meet Jake, the best friend of Helen's brother, who is there to fight back against life's hard knocks. More on him next week. Kaylee is there to get away from the desk and the screen. Windy is there to study happiness. Hugh is there to prove to himself that he's not worthless (we'll hear about him Labor Day weekend). And we meet Mason, cocky and arrogant, who is there just to stay in practice and (at least in the book version) to have an extreme adventure. He also takes the Lord's name in vain way too often (yes, I noticed). Do not be a Mason! Have a good attitude! Be a team player! Thus says Beckett, their boyish but fearless leader, who is there because in the woods, he's doesn't feel so much like an outsider. At one point, he tells Helen that as a child he didn't really fit in very well. But out in nature, he fits in. Everyone does. In the wilderness, he feels like he belongs; like he's part of something bigger. And what I especially appreciate about Beckett is that in spite of being left out, made fun of, and ostracized as a kid, he's made it his mission in life to build a team out of diverse people to

experience wilderness together. He doesn't let Mason steamroll over him. Teamwork – you're gonna learn it!

Centuries before Beckett laid down the law for Mason and the others in the wilderness, the apostle Paul said much the same thing for the church. In today's lesson from Romans, Paul writes, "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 we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us..." And when we use those gifts in concert with one another, we're able to be a team that advances the cause of Jesus Christ. Teamwork. You're gonna learn it. Why? Because we build the Kingdom together. But let's start where Paul does in today's lesson.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship." Modern readers who stop to ponder this often find ourselves asking: wait – what does Paul mean by that? How do I present my body as a living sacrifice? In his commentary on this passage, renown Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, who is currently a senior research fellow at Oxford University, points out that Jews at the time Paul was writing practiced the ritual sacrifice of animals for atonement. But Paul correctly notes earlier in Romans that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the ultimate and final sacrifice needed to bring us into a gracious relationship with God. The Christian, then, does not offer blood poured out in death, but hearts poured out in life. We give our best living selves – our energy, our intellect, our gifts, our resources, our time. We sacrifice the pleasures of the flesh for the deeper joys of the spirit, meaning that we give up the baser desires of lust, greed, gluttony, pride, envy, apathy, and resentment.

In place of these baser human frailties, we are transformed and made new. Says Paul: Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Which is the heart of the gospel, in a sense. Transformation is possible, encouraged, expected. No one meets Jesus Christ and comes out the same on the other side of the experience. But we've turned that into an individual experience. In her commentary on this lesson, Beverly Gaventa notes that Paul didn't think about it like that. "The injunction is to 'be transformed', not to 'transform yourselves'. That is, transformation comes about as the gift of God to the community and not as the accomplishment of human beings. Second, transformation involves the mind: 'be transformed by the renewing of your minds.' Here, the Greek word is *nous*, which comes close to the contemporary English notion of mindset. Transformation comes about not simply by having the right thoughts or the appropriate intellectual framework, but by a change in the way in which people think... The Christian faith is not simply another obligation to be taken up and carried out alongside other commitments—the Christian faith IS life, it is the mindset, the framework for carrying out every other thing we do." [adapted from Beverly R. Gaventa et al, *Texts for Preaching Year A*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) pg. 457-458.]. It's a mindset we share as people of faith.

Bill Ritter talks about getting into a conversation with a government land official at a dinner one night, who was sharing with the table a number of horror stories about local citizens fighting over this, violating that, abusing something else, claiming exemptions and demanding exceptions ... all in the name of special needs, special problems or special interests.

"To which Bill said: "Doesn't anybody ever say (after reviewing such matters with you): Yes, this is what I want to do. But I see (now that you have pointed it out to me) that what I want to do is not necessarily in keeping with my neighbor's needs, the city's needs or the environment's needs. So I'll go back to the drawing board and see if I can come up with something more mutually agreeable."

"In response to which, she gave me a most incredulous look ... followed by an equally incredulous laugh ... as she said: "Reverend, you must live in some kind of fantasy world."

"Well," says Bill, "yes and no." [4 ¶s adapted from "Maybe I Do Live in a Fantasy World" by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

Which, by the way, is what Paul says, too. Like the rest of us, Paul was no stranger to the reality of brokenness and suffering. How many times was he jailed, beaten, shipwrecked, persecuted, agonizing over the fate of these fledgling churches? And yet, for all that, he insists: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds... Which is not so much his acceptance of a fantasy world, as it is an acknowledgement that people of faith must have a foot in two worlds—one in the world as it is, and one in the world as it could be. A world resurrected. A world made new. A world transformed. Because you see, Paul *expected* the gospel to transform our lives. Do we? That's the mindset. And it does transform lives. It does it every day.

But transformed lives only transform the world by working together. Teamwork – you're gonna learn it. Or you're going to be miserable. Paul wraps up this passage by pointing out that each of us is gifted differently, but for the overall mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God.

Consider former Boston Celtic coaching great "Red" Auerbach. Auerbach had a reputation of being able to use older stars effectively after they had passed their prime. His secret? He sat down with such a player and explained what he expected that player to contribute to the team over the next few years. Frequently, the role was a diminished version of what the player could once have done. However, Red would tell a player, "We have a real need here and you are capable of filling it. If you will focus on what you can still do well, instead of what you once could do, you can help the team a lot." For most players, that understanding freed them to do a few things well and not be paralyzed with regret at their shortcomings and what they could no longer accomplish. [Original source unknown; as used in "Vive la Différence" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] I like Auerbach's approach because it takes into account role of experience and the reality of change.

Recently, Rev. James Bell, pastor of the First Baptist Church down in Fenton, Michigan, posted a an intriguing offering on Facebook, of all places, that reads like this:

If you belong to a church long enough, eventually it will disappoint you.

Someone will make a decision you disagree with.

A ministry you love will change.

A song you dislike will be sung.

Someone will overlook you.

The pastor will disappoint you.

People you trusted will hurt you.

But not every disappointment is evidence that we need another church.

Sometimes disappointment is where discipleship begins.

Because covenant community forces us to confront something consumer culture allows us to avoid: People are difficult.

Including us.

If I leave every community when it becomes uncomfortable, I may protect myself from difficult people.

I may also protect myself from becoming the kind of person who knows how to forgive, endure, reconcile, and love.

Sometimes the church that disappoints you is also the church through which God exposes something in you.

Not every discomfort is a sign to leave.

Some discomforts are invitations to grow. [<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1EfGm6m6Xq/>]

You get that he's talking about mindset there, right? And teamwork. Which isn't always fun or easy. Sometimes I think maybe Jesus could have gotten more done if he'd ditched the apostles and just handled things himself. I know because I sometimes think that too. I could get more done if I didn't have to deal with people. But God loves people. Each and every one of them. The difficult ones. The annoying ones. The ones who try my patience. Teamwork – you're gonna learn it. You're gonna do it. Because that's how God works. We build the Kingdom. We witness the Spirit transform hearts and lives. We worship, we pray, we give, we work – together. Because that's how Jesus did it.

“Barbara Brown Taylor writes about her nephew Will's first birthday party. At that point in his life, he was round and bald as a Buddha, still hovering on the verge of speech. As an only child, he was accustomed to being the center of attention. He wasn't really spoiled, in that he had not yet learned to manipulate the love of others for his own ends. But he was comfortable in the fact that people seemed to like him for who he was. Which is why he felt quite open and free to love them back.

“It was a good party. Just a handful of family, along with his Godparents and their seven-year-old son Jason. Along with cake ... of course. Presents ... of course. Singing ... of course. And then Will doing a little one-year-old dance (kind of a twirl, really) which everyone decided to admire and imitate ... of course.

“Which was when Jason finally had all he could take. So he charged Will in mid-dance, pushing him down to the floor ... which Will hit, first with his rear-end, then with his head. Crack! Will looked utterly surprised at first. After all, no one had ever hurt him before, and he didn't quite know what to make of it. Then he commenced to howl. But not for long. His mother reached for him, cradled him, hugged him and kissed his head better. But he didn't stay with his mother very long.

Instead, he tottered back over to Jason. He knew that whatever had happened, Jason was at the bottom of it. But since no one had ever been mean to him before, he didn't know what "it" was. So he did what he had always done. He put his arms around Jason and lay his head lovingly against that mean ol' boy's body.

“And the very fact that you can understand that instinct (and its appropriateness to the Gospel) ... even if you can't always emulate it ... means that you do have a small tent pitched in a world that is not quite like the "real world." A world you take on faith... A world where people do, occasionally, "take on the mind of Christ" ... who, as I remember it, once took on all the meanness of the world and ran it through the filter of his own body. And then said: "What you have seen in me, do."

There are those out there who would call that world, "madness" or even "fantasy." But then – concludes Bill Ritter – there is a team of us — with a foot in it, an eye toward it, a mind set on it — who call that world, "home"... and are building together. [5 ¶s from “Maybe I Do Live in a Fantasy World” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.] Amen.