

Did you ever feel more distant from God than you'd like? As if God's speaking to you, God's directions for you weren't coming as clearly as you'd like? That somehow it's hard for you to feel you are entering immediately into the presence of God? Did you ever know a church where there was a little too much "slippage" between how people acted on Sunday morning and how they acted the other six and a half days? (Some of you who have joined our church recently have mentioned how nice it is that people here are at the least friendly—that even friendliness to guests is not always a given in a church.) Don't you love being among people who seem to be enjoying a glad integration between their life of faith, their church life—and their "real life," their life outside of church involving relationships, family, career, investments, TV, school, etc?

On our vacation this summer we visited some of the picturesque Southern cities which have managed to preserve something of their antebellum splendor. Savannah, GA, was particularly intriguing. One of the styles of architecture making for the most majestic sorts of mansions before the Civil War (one reason Savannah is so interesting is that some of these stately old Federalist buildings still survive) featured the prominent front door raised up a story above ground level. There are matched twin stairways spiraling gently up from the front garden which meet on a landing outside the substantial front door. You can't miss the stairways or the front door—the focal point.

What you can miss—we did, until a guide pointed them out—is that down below all this structure, at the ground floor, sometimes off to the side, sometimes directly underneath the main front door, there's another door, very modest. But it was there for a reason. It was there to be the separate door into the servants' quarters. (Actually, given that these homes existed before the Civil War, these doors opened into the slaves' quarters.) The members of the family would never enter down here; the slaves could never enter in where family and invited guests and friends entered in—they were relegated to coming and going and living in their own shabby rooms down below. Unless obeying orders, they were not free to enter into the owners' quarters above.)

In Christ Jesus, God keeps inviting every one of us: slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female—to come more deeply into His presence, to come into His home, to enter in thru the front door freely open to family and friends. When we fail to draw near to God, when we fail to understand who we are in Christ, when we fail to worship Him in spirit and in truth, when a church remains a collection of individuals, we're choosing to slink in and out thru the slave doors. (By the way—those historical slaves often managed much better than this: their trust in Jesus, their abiding hope in God's ultimate goodness and justice amid unpardonable cruelty and indignity, their lively sense of Christian community helped them to keep their eyes above and endure and sometimes even confront the evil here below [Sojourner Truth, and many others] in commendable ways.)

We may fully understand we are not worthy to enter into the presence of the Eternal One, the Most Holy God—that's terribly true—but still, you and I have been adopted into the household of faith. But by His mercies you and I and every man, woman and child is invited to become part of the divine family—a fellow heir with Jesus. You have been invited to come into His Church, come into the very presence of God, come right in and worship Him, thru the front door. The door reserved for family. (Jesus

is the Doorway into new life.) If you're a slave you cannot beg, borrow, steal or buy the right to come in thru that special front door. It can only be freely given. If we're sinful human beings, we cannot beg, borrow, steal, buy, or behave our way into the presence of God except thru the mercies of God shown us most completely in Jesus Christ the Son. But thanks be to God, He has invited us; the front door into authentic worship and lively communion with Him is wide open to each of us.

You know all this; I suppose almost every Christian does. In theory, the doorway to closeness with God is always open. In theory, prayer should be exciting and life-changing. In theory, our work should be invigorating and fulfilling, because God has created us to find and live out our "vocatio," our life-purpose. In theory, we should be so happy about worshiping together every Sunday with our church family it would never enter our mind to miss a day were it not painfully necessary. And the challenge for us followers of Jesus, always, is to move from the theoretical to the actual. We live actual, not theoretical lives. We go to work, try to love our spouses, our families, or deal with our singleness; try to fashion lives which will count for something, try to leave a mark and make a difference in this world; we have to make choices about everything from what's for dinner to what to watch on TV to which school is best for our teenager to issues of health and exercise and diet and finances...

I love being in this church in which you, the church, the people, are working to integrate all these various aspects of life so as to be most fully aligned with the will of God. Christ's church is never content to remain a Sunday morning church, a theoretical church. I love being part of a church in whom there's no sharp distinction between what happens during this hour on Sunday morning inside the walls and what happens during all those other hours God gives us each week outside the walls. I love it that you, our members, know that every business meeting you attend, every birdie putt you line up, every diaper you change, every quiz you take at school, every movie you watch, every tank of gas you pump, every hand of bridge you play is somehow an act of worship.

All this is some of what's going on in this first verse of chapter 12 in Romans. Paul begins this appeal, this reminder, this encouragement to the Church this way: "Sisters and brothers, I appeal to you all by the mercies of God, to present your bodies—your entire persons—as a living sacrifice on the altar before God..."

Paul is imploring us to offer our bodies, our entire selves, as a living sacrifice in worship "by the mercies of God." This is one way we walk thru the Door, one way we enter more deeply into the Presence of God and those others also choosing to worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

We can never understand fully enough the extent of the mercy of God which has come to us in Christ; His Holy Spirit of mercy which keeps pursuing us even when we are most deadset against receiving His gift of forgiveness. ("While we were yet sinners, while we were still active in armed insurrection against the Liberator, the Savior, Christ died for us" [Romans 5:8]) "The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." [Zephaniah 3:17]

Do you remember the LORD God rejoices over you with gladness and renews you as you offer yourself? That He's so happy about you He can't help breaking into song? He knows all about my fears, my past, my habitual slinking in and out of that

downstairs doorway reserved for those who will not come in freedom and in gratitude thru the Door of His Mercy. He knows how easy it is for us humans to stay out of His Home altogether, since it takes repentance a humble spirit to recognize His mercy and enter in. “Blessed are you when you are poor in spirit...”

[And speaking of doorways, there’s the famous entryway into the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, now on the West Bank. It was already ancient when the Crusaders arrived in the 11th Century; in order to prevent armed enemy cavalry from riding their horses into this sanctuary, they lowered the main doorway to a mere four feet high. Most adults standing tall and proud cannot enter into this house of worship—you must bend down or kneel to come in. Not the historical significance of that doorway, but not a bad image.]

I know this is not news to any of you, but it’s still worth mentioning: the mercy of God forms the basis of this, Paul’s earnest urging to this church in Rome—to come into the Presence of God, thru the front Door, the family Door, of the mercy of God—Jesus Christ. Come into the life God has for you, individually and together as Church. We cannot enter into the Door, into the Kingdom, into Christ’s Church, into eternal life, but by this Key. How we understand and respond to this Key, the mercy and compassion of God for all the world shown us in Christ, unlocks the meaning of this text (and I suppose most significant biblical texts and most every Christian truth.)

Until I understand about this, until I am willing to enter in thru this Door and come Home, church will remain peripheral to me, the living God will remain largely theoretical instead of real to me. I may appreciate the music, I may appreciate the wonderful work the Church School teachers are doing, I may appreciate that my children are getting a good spiritual grounding, I may appreciate that there are many wonderful committed people in this or any given church: but I will consign myself to the role of spectator rather than participant, outsider rather than full family member to the extent that I cannot or will not enter into the Christian life thru the Door of the mercy of God: Jesus.

I know it seems I am belaboring this point—but everything else Paul is saying here derives from this central truth. All the ancients and surely his Jewish hearers would have grasped immediately and instinctively this vivid and positive analogy—but it has no meaning for us since we live in a world and an era which does not remember animal sacrifices, does not remember wrathful gods needing to be appeased. Thinks of spilt blood only as “yuk, gross!” But here’s what Paul’s word picture is getting at: “Offer your bodies, your entire selves, to God, as an alive sacrifice; a sacrifice on the altar still living and breathing.”

[This image also obliterates the distinction between secular/sacred professions: after Jesus, there’s no need of a priest. Now every career may be made sacred—rabbi and race car driver, high school principal, student and custodian, artist, stockbroker, banker, professor, priest, pastry chef, bank teller, yogi, you name it—all are lives which may be lived as worship to God. Every kind of person is invited into the Father’s Home.]

“You no longer need to rely on the lambs or goats or other ceremonial burnt offerings and dead sacrifices offered on the altar by the temple priests to “cover” you or paper over your sins in the eyes of God; that era has passed since Jesus [the High Priest] has come. No: what’s left now is for each of you, all of you, to worship God with your whole self, by presenting your whole self, your body, your all, as a sacrifice offered fully into the hands of the merciful and sovereign God waiting to love you and guide you.

Present not only your imagination, your intellect, your Sunday mornings, the “church mode/church compartment” of your life. Offer the whole thing: every minute in your day, every dream you dream, every thought you think, every word you hear or speak, every emotion you feel, every worry you entertain, every degree you have received, every business deal you sign, every person you love, every class you take—“take every thought captive to Christ”—basically climb yourself up there onto that altar and offer everything you are and were and ever will be into living eternal service to God.”

Well then. Any questions?

One basic question. People who don’t know Jesus would ask why ever would anyone do that? (Those of us who do still have plenty of our own private questions, too.) Paul has anticipated and answered them by the wording of his appeal. We are to present our bodies, our entire selves, as a living sacrifice—which is our worship of God which is logical (literally: “λογικεν”, logical,) also translated as “spiritual”/ “reasonable”/ “offered by mind and heart” (NRSV, NIV, REB.) It makes sense for our brains and our hearts to offer ourselves in total worship to God because God has demonstrated for us His forgiveness and mercy and love.

But now a second, even more basic question. What does it mean to “worship” God? The definition of worship comes down to this: “ascribe, assign, attribute, or declare the worth of something.” People use the term loosely of a teenager who “just worships” this History teacher or that rock star; people in various religions worship all sorts of gods and goddesses and idols. All are responses which mimic, which misdirect our innate God-given desire to worship the living God who alone is worthy of our worship. (Many worshipful responses can be well-intended and heartfelt, and of course some idols are more harmful than others. Some more closely approximate the God we have seen in Christ than others.) This all ties back into the Key: we cannot enter into worship of the living God more deeply than we have experienced the living God, and we experience God most fully in Jesus the Christ and thru His Holy Spirit now present for us.

But never mind the theological-sounding talk. What it comes down to is this: How we worship, how we live, answers the question “What is God worth to you?” (Jesus has shown you, by His life and journey to the cross, what you are worth to God.) The consistency and all-encompassing quality of your worship will accurately reflect what you think God is worth to you this day. Our responses, our lives, our worship, keep evolving.)

The apostle Paul had been encountered by the risen Christ; Paul had spent himself wholeheartedly opposing Jesus and His work so Paul could experience His refining and all-consuming forgiveness on the Road to Damascus. (To one degree or another, each of us has also been encountered by the risen Christ, or we wouldn’t be here. Each of us has tasted of the goodness of God, has heard the Voice of our Good Shepherd, has been refreshed by His Spirit, been renewed by His mercies, or we wouldn’t be here.)

Paul could not begin to contain his worship of God in an hourly weekly Worship Service. He roamed throughout the Mediterranean world and understood every step, every sermon, every shipwreck, every beating, every dilemma, every Bible Study, every friendship, every opportunity to preach in every synagogue or on every riverbank, wherever the people of God were gathering to worship as part of His living, reasonable worship of God.

Jesus likewise. Those forty days the Son spent in the presence of the Father, open to the Spirit, getting clarity, overcoming fear, gaining strength. His life thereafter became ministry, became service to the Father, every beatitude preached, every leper cleansed, every Pharisee confronted, every curse uttered, every exorcism casting out demons, every dinner enjoyed with castoffs and lowlifes and rejects, every sign performed, every sermon preached, every speedy getaway made, every quiet getaway to the lonely places for prayer enjoyed, every lost soul invited to receive the forgiveness of God, to enter into the eternal Home thru the main Doorway especially for the family members, the adopted children of the Most High God—all these counted as Jesus' worship of the Father. Every parable told: remember the one about the miserable greedy son of the loving father who made a horrible decision, insulted the father, burned thru his inheritance, came back with his tail between his legs after all his other options evaporated and he knew he was starving—and the Father runs out to welcome him Home, kill the fatted calf, throw a party, invite the neighbors—no questions asked, no probation required...Remember that one, about the mercies of God showered upon the most unworthy? Can you top that guy? [The question is never whether the Father will receive and forgive—the only question is always when we will come to our senses and come Home to experience the reception and forgiveness and new assignments He lovingly waits to shower upon us.]

I hope it's clear by now where we hear the good news in all this. (I know it has taken us a while to get here: who wants to be compared to a slab of charcoaled beef or lamb plopped on the ceremonial altar by temple Jewish priest? But that image is Paul's "before" shot—while you and I, our lives freely offered, our church's future freely offered, Christ's Church freely offered—our lives, Sunday morning and every morning, worshiping in the sanctuary and being the church and shopping and playing and studying and eating and drinking and working become the "after" shot. (I'm sure we can be forgiven our reluctance to make this connection.) But what Paul was getting at in his way, in his day, is still important, and the principle still pertains: what has not been put to death cannot be resurrected. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.)" [John 12 24-25]

My favorite of the church dynamics experts is a man named Bill Easum. [He's the consultant who spoke to the UCC General Synod the year I was a delegate, who assessed exactly what our denomination could use—and he was gutsy enough to say it. Not organizational reform at headquarters, but a new encounter with the Holy Spirit of God.] But some 30 years before, he had been a Methodist pastor whose bishop appointed him to a dying congregation of about 30 old people in San Antonio. His assignment was to bury the church with dignity, so those folks wouldn't feel too bad about the demise, too bad about having become a total failure, then resume his career and get re-assigned to a going church. Trouble is once he got this dying church to admit they were dead; once they all admitted it was a lost cause and they were going to "go under" anyway; once they began to pray and to worship and to live as if their lives, individually and together belonged to God and once they offered their church a living sacrifice to God as if God was their only hope and it was God's Church anyway—guess what. God began to resurrect that little church which had been dying for decades.

The theme repeated itself in the ministry of Bill Easum. That old dying church, once God resurrected it, became a church of over 2400 committed members, with 5 or 6 different types of worship services every weekend and various ministries and small groups all over the place. Somewhere along the line he became a very busy guy under a lot of pressure—so busy he had a heart attack [I think it was] and had to go on leave. He had to learn to quit trying to carry that church around on his back, quit trying so hard, quit trying to build it himself—and let God resurrect it. So God did. When Easum came back to be pastor, it was on very different terms—he had to keep reminding himself whose church it was, and who was attracting the people and changing the hearts and minds and lives. And it was not the pastor. It was the living God who brings new life, who accepts our authentic worship and transforms us in the offering of it.

Sunday morning worshiping God as Christ's church, with all of you, is a great privilege. (As a matter of fact, the music is glorious. The sanctuary does often feel like holy space. It is a pleasure to see our sisters and brothers, old and new, Sunday to Sunday.) But this is just the beginning. Our 10:00 Worship hour together is still only just the beginning.

Here's a simple way to say it: "Begin at once: before you venture away from this quiet moment, ask your King to take you wholly into His service, and place all the hours of this day quite simply at His disposal, and ask Him to make and keep you ready to do just exactly what He appoints. Never mind about tomorrow; one day at a time is enough. Try it today and see if it is not a day of strange, almost curious peace, so sweet that you will be only too thankful when tomorrow comes to ask Him to take it, also." (Francis Ridley Havergal, d. 1879)

Romans 12:1-8

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 reasonable 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.

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 we are 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.