

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 27, 2017

Text: Romans 12:1-8

*"By God's Mercies, We are His Church"*

When you hear the word "church," what comes into your mind? Perhaps a building. An aunt of Kirby's is a gifted painter. Of the paintings of hers that I have seen, most are watercolors of winter scenes, and somewhere in the painting there stands a church building with a steeple front and center. It is a classic style, but I think that it is more than that for her: her churches looked very much like the one in which she was baptized, confirmed and married in Winkler, Manitoba. Church: it's about more than a building, isn't it? I one of my few childhood forays into a Sunday School, I learned this familiar saying and hand play: "Here is the church, and here is the steeple; open the doors and see all the people!" "Church" is the name for the people who live by faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a name taken from Scripture, and it means "called out ones." The Church is the people whom God has called to be His own people and His witnesses and servants in this world.

Paul wrote letters to congregations that were part of Christ's Church. He had had a hand in the birth of many of them because their people were those to whom Paul had preached the good message of Jesus crucified for our sins and risen for our salvation. God the Holy Spirit called them to faith and new life through preaching of Paul and others.

Though he had not yet met the Christians of Rome, Paul wrote to them the epistle or letter that has given us our second readings in worship all this spring and summer. Today's reading brings us to a turning point in the letter. Through chapters 1 to 11, Paul wrote to teach the Romans and us what God has done to make us a part of His Church. In short, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Human beings are a mess, and Paul began his letter by pointing out some the evidence of our plight. Though God made us, we are driven by a desire to be gods ourselves. We want to call the shots. We do things in life the way we like. Unfortunately, our ways are not God's, and so we earn for ourselves His anger and judgment.

Paul did acknowledge that there are many religiously-minded people in the world who try very hard to be good enough to deserve a place in God's Church. The trouble is, people who try to please and serve God by keeping laws or by pursuing ideals are doomed to failure. For every one person that manages to keep a New Year's resolution there are ninety-nine others who don't. Find me a person who believes that God is happy with his best efforts to be a good person, and I'll show you someone who is fooling himself. God isn't happy with what we think of as a good person: someone who hasn't killed anyone and tries his best. He made us for something much better than that; something that it is impossible for us to accomplish ourselves. We humans all live in a deadly mess called sin, a spiritual quicksand from which we cannot free ourselves.

But God stepped in to rescue us. That, wrote Paul, is the good news for a world filled only with bad news. God sent His Son Jesus as a man into this world to live a life of perfect harmony with God's ways. Jesus' life among us shows us what we were really made for. We were made to know, trust and love God with lives of willing service. Jesus lived that way to honor God and to rescue us from sin and death.

On the cross, Jesus offered up His innocent life as the ultimate sacrifice infinitely greater than the sacrifices of the Old Testament or any other sacrifice a human might imagine. Jesus suffered and died in our place, as one guilty of all sin and rebellion against God. Our punishment killed Him. But it could not hold Him. Jesus' death paid the debt we owe God for our sin, and God raised Him from the dead to signal that through Jesus we are forgiven and free. Jesus has rescued us to be God's own people, members of His Church and heirs of eternal life.

Jesus died for our sins, and He rose to make things right between God and us! These very words are the vehicle through which the Holy Spirit calls us and enables us to believe that the Lord has rescued us. Through faith in Jesus, we receive His rescue from sin, death and condemnation proclaimed in God's Word. Through faith in Jesus, we know that when we were baptized, the death and resurrection of Jesus became ours, just as our sin and death were His on the cross. Through faith in Jesus, we know that the Holy Spirit has made us part of Christ's Church, also called God's family, and we are His dear children, born again of water and the Spirit, and set free to live to honor God and be a blessing to other people.

Why did God do this for us? Why did He rescue us through His Son? All that God did to save us, He did because He is rich beyond our understanding in mercy. God loves us, and Jesus is Love Incarnate, God's love in human flesh, took our sin and death, and gave us in exchange, peace with God and new, never-ending life as God's people, His Church. Mercy! Praise God for His mercy!

That, in a nutshell, is the message of chapters 1 to 11 of Paul's letter to the Romans. Today's reading continues Paul's teaching. It begins to answer an important question: how do we live as people of the Church, those called to belong to God through faith in Jesus?

Paul describes how: *"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."* Under the Old Testament, priests were appointed from among the Israelites to lead them in worship of God that consisted of a number of sacrificial offerings. Sacrifices were made for sin and guilt. Offerings expressed thanks to God for His provision and trust in God to watch over His people in the future. To establish the New Testament, Jesus fulfilled the roles of both the priest offering sacrifice for sin and the sacrifice itself atoning for our sin. Raised from the dead, Jesus remains ever our High Priest, having rescued us from death to live as God's people. According to Paul's appeal, we live as God's people by being priests to God who offer to Him, not dead sacrifices, but the living ones of ourselves. We are not our own. Christ bought us with His death, and we belong to God who

raised Jesus from the dead. As the Church, we people who live for God our rescuer. We worship God in every part of our lives because of His mercies to us in Jesus.

By God's mercies, we belong to Him, but we also live in this world, and this world is still very much in a state of rebellion against God. In the world we hear much about people deciding for themselves who they are and how they will live. The heroes of this world are those who succeed at living out their dreams and fulfilling their ambitions, gaining for themselves glory and honor in the form of popularity, influence and wealth. Self is the god of this world, and its people expend a great deal of energy promoting ways of life centered on self.

The propaganda of the world tempts us to forget God's mercies in Jesus, and to return to living for ourselves in the world. It laughs at God's warnings. It claims that freedom is ours to define, not God's. It despises God's rescue in Jesus, assuring us that we manage quite nicely ourselves.

This is why Paul teaches us that being the Church in this world involves saying "no" to the world, resisting its pressure, and rejecting its lies by being transformed in our thinking each day by the mercies of God. *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."* We begin each day with God and His mercies as our life's foundation. The great reality for us as the Church is Jesus. He lived for us. He died for us. He rose for us. He ascended to heaven for us. He called us by His Spirit through baptism to be God's own people. He is our forgiveness for selfish living, and He is our strength to live for God and our neighbors. He is our promise of resurrection and eternal life in death. Jesus is God's mercy and our Rescuer. Each day provides us with more chances to thank God for His mercies and to learn to live them out in relationships with our neighbors to help them know God and His love for them.

For many today, the word "church" means little more than an institution run by religious people with little to offer them. But Paul teaches us that as the Church, we share the one thing that people need above anything else. We have Jesus. We know the mercies of God: God has rescued us from sin and death by giving us His Son. We are His precious, forgiven people. We live by faith in God's mercies ourselves, and we give them to our neighbors in words of faith and acts of love. Amen.