

Worship Service “*Standing Out*”

Pentecost 13, Sunday, Year A

27th August 2023

Romans 12:1-8 NIV / Matthew 16:13-20 NRSVUE

Prelude

Opening Music [Jesus I Will Walk With You](#)

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Mixed by Matt Dennis, Resound Audio <http://resoundaudio.co.uk> CCLI SONG #7162360, 2019 Joyful Noise
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Greeting/Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *Breathe Upon Us, Holy Spirit* 28

Call to Worship

We gather together in the name of our God, the Maker of heaven and earth, who calls us away from the customs and attitudes of the world around Us, and invites us instead into a transforming relationship with Him and with one another. Let's worship God together!

Invocation

Lord God, Maker of heaven and earth, we gather together in Your name.

We come as living sacrifices, to offer You our worship and thanksgiving, our praise and our prayers. Come among us, living Lord. Through the power of Your Holy Spirit, transform our hearts and minds so that we may recognize Your presence, hear Your voice, know Your will, and walk in Your way. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Our Epistle reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Roman church stresses the importance of using the gifts we've been given to discern and demonstrate the will of God for our lives. As we listen to these words from Romans, let's think how we use our own gifts in our ministry in this world.

Epistle Reading Romans 12:1-8 NIV

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,

so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;

if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach;

if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious and eternal God, you have raised up your name and your word above everything; your steadfast love endures for ever. In a world where every day some division or strife arises we bring our prayers for others and for ourselves. Do not turn from the work of your hand, your human creation and the world in which you have set us: by your holy breath comfort the lonely; bind up the broken-hearted and those who mourn; calm the fearful; rejoice with those who celebrate; be present to those who call on your name, to those we named on our lips, and in the silence of our hearts, those whose concerns are known only to you; in Jesus' name we pray, Amen

Hymn

Have Thine Own Way

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Our gospel lesson this morning reflects a scene where Jesus asks his disciples to witness to who they think he is. As we listen to these words from Matthew, let's reflect on who we think Jesus is, and how we witness about him in our own lives.

Gospel Lesson Matthew 16:13-20 NRSVUE

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Message – *Standing Out*

When we think of being a witness, our thoughts might lead us to images of courtroom dramas where individuals testify in an important trial with information that leads to a conviction or acquittal. Or we might think of someone who sees something happening, and can lend corroboration to an event, such as a traffic accident. Witnesses also provide legal validation in important life events, such as a wedding, or make some legal documents legitimate by verifying that the person signing the document is who they claim to be. In our journeys of faith, witnessing is not so different from those images we have from popular culture and our secular lives.

In our reading from Matthew today, the disciples testify as witnesses to the actions of Jesus. Some see him as an important prophet or figure from Israel's history reborn. But the star witness, Peter, testifies that his observation reveals Jesus to be the Messiah, the redeemer and savior of Israel. Like all witnesses, they have been observers of certain events, and they verify that they have witnessed being present at those events, and to the truth of what they have seen.

The Gospels themselves are depositions which relay the truth about events these men have been a part of, from their own individual perspectives. These testimonies certainly fit into how we define what is expected from a legal perspective. They are similar to the stories a witness would tell in the courtroom, or the legitimacy one would give to a legal document in verifying that Jesus is who he says he is.

In the church, there is a long tradition of continuing the practice of testifying to our own interactions with the Divine, and the effects that has had on our own lives. This episode establishes a long observed practice of witnessing to the influence of following Jesus in our own lives during our gathered worship together. While that is not as common in many churches today, for millennia it was more the norm than not. One could argue that much of Paul's ministry was all about testifying to the events that not only transformed his life, but also how those events impacted the lives of those he testified to. And while first hand testimony can be powerful, in our reading from Romans today, Paul also highlights another form of witness that can be just as powerful. He begins by highlighting a choice we all face in how we live our lives.

We all have talents and gifts from our Creator. We can choose to focus those gifts and abilities on the concerns of a worldly life, or we can let ourselves be transformed to focus on God's kin-dom. We can focus just on using our abilities to better ourselves and our own life, or we can put our gifts together to accomplish so much more to transform this world. We all have a role to play in a grander story, and each of us provides one ingredient that when put together, makes a much better product than the individual components on their own.

There's a story about the time a preacher had a minute with the children before the sermon. He called them up front and he spoke about the ingredients required to make up a church, using a chocolate chip cookie as an example. He explained to the children that, as with a cookie requiring ingredients such as sugar and eggs, the church needed ingredients to make up the congregation. Holding the cookie high, he asked, "If I took the chocolate chips out of this cookie, what would I have?" A 6 year old girl raised her hand. "Six less grams of fat," she replied. While I'm sure we could all use a little less fat in our diets, this story gives an interesting little illustration of what really makes a church. It is the sum of its ingredients. All the parts should work together to make an effective whole.

Paul illustrates for us not only the powerful witness we make when we use our God given talents as intended, but the much more potent testimony we give when we use those talents together. Each gift has its own merit, yet they all have their place and role in making the body of Christ the witness it is called to be.

In our scripture this morning, Paul talks about what that should look like. He talks about the need to sacrifice and give. We are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, living not by this world but transformed by the renewing of our minds as we embark on our journeys as believers. The word in the original Greek of verse 2 for "transformation" is the basis for our

word “metamorphosis.” It reminds us of the caterpillar in the cocoon which grows into a butterfly, and that’s the idea here. The transformation that Paul is talking about happens from the inside out. By the power of God in our lives, we are being transformed into the people that God always intended us to be.

How do you think of yourselves? Do you see your lives as transformed to the ways of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit, or do you see the influence of the world at work? Paul explains that this transformation begins with the renewal of our minds. Paul uses the analogy of the human body to describe the unity all Christians have in Christ. We are the eyes, ears, head, hands, legs and feet of Christ. All Christians are part of one body of Christ, all of whom have vital parts that work together. Each part is different, but the parts need each other. Christians have individual gifts, and these gifts are really a gift of God’s grace. They are like parts of a human body. When one part of a body disappears, we look for it. Do we look for a member of the body of Christ when that member disappears? If we truly understand the importance of our salvation by grace, we will want to give back to God out of gratitude and thanksgiving.

When we truly understand God’s mercy, we will want to worship God, following Jesus with every ounce of our being. God’s love and sacrifice for us will motivate us to love and to sacrifice ourselves in return. That sacrifice involves using the gifts he has given us to do the divine work in our world. This different way of thinking and approaching our lives in this world is a powerful witness to what it means to be a follower of Christ. Certainly sharing the impact our faith has had on our own lives can be powerful, but seeing that faith in action is a potent testimony all its own. When we stick out because we don't follow the expected, self-focused patterns of this world, it makes people curious. It invites further exploration as to what makes you so different. I'm reminded of a conversation that occurred years ago when I worked in the secular world.

A dear friend was going through a separation from her husband, was struggling financially, and seeking to make a new start. I gladly offered to put her and her children up in my own home while she got back on her feet. My coworkers were amazed at how generous and kind I was to put myself out like that for a friend. Yet in my own mind, I couldn't imagine any other possibility. That's just what you do. When your mind transforms to a different way of perceiving life, it stands out. When you use your gifts and resources for something bigger than yourself, people take notice.

St. Francis once said that you should preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words. How do we preach the gospel silently in our own lives? Yet Paul highlights that this is also a group effort. When we put our gifts together, the sum of those talents can be so much greater than the whole. They are all important parts of one body.

Mark McGuire, former first baseman of the St. Louis Cardinals once said, “When I feel the ball hit right on the sweet spot, a home run is just around the corner.” I believe that when we serve Jesus from our spiritual sweet spot, a spiritual home run is just around the corner.

Paul tells that we have a sweet spot, a spiritual gift—a special talent or ability that God has given us so that we can produce the maximum result in making a world of difference in our community and around the globe and experience the maximum satisfaction. Yet, we cannot even begin to imitate Christ’s gifts in ministry on our own, because his abilities and ministries were so varied. When we come together as one body we can collectively demonstrate the many and varied forms of ministry that he wants to perform through our united effort.

The Holy Spirit gives each of us the correct portion so that we can fulfill our individual roles within the entire body of Christ. We have to consider our roles within the body of Christ because each of our roles is different. Each role is represented by the individual gifts believers have. While our individual actions can draw the attention of the world around us, imagine the impact we can have together. The question is, are we living the lives of witness we are called to, individually, and as a communal body? Do we stand out because of the transformation of our minds, or do we just fit into the ways of the world around us? What do people see or think when they pass by that building on the hill? Does it stick out or just blend into the surroundings? As we journey forward, let's give some thought as to how our faith transforms our own lives, and how our community of faith can better reflect that metamorphosis to the world around us. What are we being called to as a body? May we work together to seek that calling, and to be the witnesses we are called to be. Amen.

Call to Serve

With praise and thanks, we create new life. With vigor and sweat, we deliver our love. With care and hope, we stretch out our hands. We give our gifts of tithes and offerings to renew the world again.

As we listen to this interlude played by Annie, let's give some thought how we might make our lives a visible witness to the gospel shared by Christ, and the values and actions those words promote through our own gifts and talents.

A Time for Reflection

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

In deep gratitude for all that You have done for us, we offer ourselves and our gifts to You—living sacrifices of worship and praise. Transform our hearts and minds from the inside out; show us what is good and pleasing in Your sight, so that we may be quick to recognize Your call, and quick to respond. In the name of Jesus, our Messiah and Lord, Amen.

Hymn

Christian, Let Your Burning Light

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Benediction

You are the body of Christ.

May you have the heart of Christ,
tender for mercy.

May you have the eyes of Christ
to see a world in need.

May you have the feet of Christ
to bring good news.

Go in peace!

And God go with you.

Postlude