



“Action Speaks Louder than Words”

Texts: Romans 12:1-13, James 2:14-26

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

So how many of you here have done the hokey pokey? It’s an active, if not silly, song, but it reminds me of what Paul tells us in this passage from Romans. “Therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship.” “To present your bodies” is Paul’s way of saying, “Put your whole self in.”

How often have you left church thinking, “That sermon did nothing for me today.” or “Robert didn’t play his best today.” Ok, I know that you never think that because Robert is never off in his playing, but you get what I’m saying. You may have some Sundays where the service touches you and others where it means nothing. I’ve heard that a lot over the years. But my question to you is: Do you present your bodies as a living sacrifice as your spiritual worship?

We think of worship as the music, the liturgy, and the sermon; but it is more than that. Worship starts with giving yourself over to God. Coming to church with an expectation of encountering God. Of being present not just with your body, but with your mind and soul. But this verse means more than just being fully present in a worship service. It means living out your life in a way that is pleasing to God, that gives honor and glory to God. All that you do becomes worship to God, or it should.

We have spent a lot of time this year in Exodus, looking at how God related to the Hebrew people. For God, it’s all about community, family. It carries over in the New Testament as we are told in Acts how the early church gave all that they could so that no one was lacking. Community. Family. That has always been the message of the Bible, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. Our God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. So that same God that was so focused on the care of the “family”, the community, that was continually calling the people of God back to that, continues to call us to that today.

But what does community mean today? I grew up on a street of 21 houses. It was a great street to grow up on. Lots of kids who played together. Parents who liked each other and would always keep an eye on any kid that was out playing. Picnics in each other's backyards. Caring for one another when someone was sick or facing a challenging time.

My family lived in that house for 50 years and we saw a lot of change come to that street. About a year or so before I moved, I was talking with my neighbor who had lived there since he was a newlywed and now had two young boys. I asked him how he saw the neighborhood. He said he liked it because it was friendly "but not too friendly". People weren't up in your business, he said. I thought about that and wondered if he would have thought the interactions of my parents' generation would have been considered by this man as "being up in your business"? Where I had always seen it as a caring community who watched out for each other.

This conversation occurred way before the Pandemic, which has just caused more isolation and helped to break down even more any sense of community. We, with our human selfishness, have always been focused on caring for ourselves and our loved ones first. If we have leftover energy and time, we may give that to helping others... Maybe. We have gotten so far away from what the community of faith was ever meant to be. But the call to be a living sacrifice, living a life of worship to God, means getting outside of ourselves and helping others - both within and beyond these walls.

But when we are basically selfish people at the core of our being, how do we move out of that? We are told how we can do that through verse two. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind; that you may prove what is the will of God. What is good, and right, and pleasing to God." How do we get our minds transformed? That requires an openness to the Holy Spirit to transform our thinking from me to you/them. When we give ourselves over to God, when we ask God to come in and really transform us, we allow God to shape us into God's image. Our minds are renewed when we not just study scripture, but allow its words to bring new life to us. Our minds are transformed when we really understand and can accept God's grace and mercy for us. When we understand the impact of Christ's death for us, then our minds can begin to be renewed through that mercy. Our heart's desires SHOULD be to give back out of gratitude. And part of that proving of the will of God comes through community. If every member of the community was striving for this renewing of the mind and being a living sacrifice, then together God could transform this community, this family of believers, and make your lives a living sacrifice, a worship, to God through community action done together.

We enter this worship space each week with our own baggage. Some baggage we've been lugging around for years, not sure how to get rid of it, or sometimes not willing to get rid of it; because, as ugly and old as that luggage is, it is known and has a certain comfort in it, even though you know it is dysfunctional to carry around. Others carry around more contemporary distractions - job stress, family issues, health issues. How do we help others when we can't even help ourselves? But, again, that is what a healthy community can do as we bear one another burdens so that we can all come to a place of healthier being.

We need to do that because we need to be more than a Sunday morning church. Because that is what you are now. You aren't much of a community. You are primarily a Sunday morning church. But we need to be witnessing a community who does the work of the Lord outside of these walls. That is what it means to be a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Our bodies worship God through our actions; through our care for others. That is what is pleasing to God.

This past week the worshipping leaders of the One God/One Community met together to plan for this next year. Early on in my arrival here I was talking with someone about One God/One Community. I began talking about ideas that could help raise money for something in the community. The person I was talking with said that wasn't the focus of One God/One Community. It was on education - learning about each other's faith and how those faiths interact with each other and with the world. But I've seen what can occur when worshipping bodies join together to make a difference in their communities. Real differences in the lives of the poor and the struggling.

I wanted to ask about this in the meeting, but being the newbie, I waited a bit. Before I had the opportunity, one of the other leaders said, "We need to have some action to go along with the education." Yay, was I happy to hear that! It was decided that some activity would be planned for the communities to be involved in; and perhaps it could be done through Memorial's community program. I don't know yet what that will look like. Rabbi Mazo and myself have been tasked with coming up with that idea, but I hope it is well attended by you and all the people of these five worshipping communities.

Yesterday something interesting came across my Facebook page. A friend had posted a video of Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking. Words that I had never heard before. He spoke about the emancipation, but he said with freedom came famine, as so many left the plantations with nothing. They were given no means to live - no money to start anew, no land. Nothing. Dr. King went on to say that his people were being told to just pull themselves up by the boot straps and quit complaining. However, he said when you're barefooted, you have no bootstraps with which to pull yourself up. That statement was so on point and it made me mad. I thought about all those kids my children played with in Africa. Arriving at my house with their flip flops on and half the time walking home barefooted. They were barefoot so often that even when they wore flip flops they would often forget to put them on when they left. They weren't

used to having footwear on. They lived their lives barefooted - literally and figuratively. And so it is with so many of our black and brown brothers and sisters today. It is our job as caring and materially blessed Christians to help those who are in need to at least give them a pair of boots so that they may have a fighting chance of helping themselves get out of depressed situations.

Our second passage this morning from James talks about faith and deeds. James tells the reader that he will show his faith through his deeds. The question of whether we are saved by grace or by our good deeds has never been the right question. The question should be: Is your faith deep enough that it then manifests itself outward? Because that is what good deeds are, a manifestation of one's faith. We are NOT only called to help others, but should DESIRE to do so because of our faith; because of the mercy that God has first shown us.

Our bodies should be a living sacrifice and in that sacrifice, true worship of God. It is the best way to worship God - through our actions, through our compassion, through our care of those who can't pull themselves up by their bootstraps. That is what we are called to do. With our minds transformed by God from a me mindset to a them mindset, from my problems to their problems; when we can work together as a transformed people, putting our bodies to work in the worship and glory of God, then true transformation can come - not just for me or you, but for all of us and for the greater community beyond us. Be a living sacrifice. Have your mind transformed. Care enough to give a pair of boots to someone who is going through life barefoot. Amen.

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