

Romans 12:1-8
August 27, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

I have been playing golf for as long as I can recall. My dad put a club in my hands at a very early age and ever since I have been trying to become the best golfer I can be; however, I realized a long time ago I have limits. I wasn't entrusted with the gifts to be the next to dawn the green jacket awarded to the winner of the Masters. Nonetheless, I love the game and as a child growing up I recall going to many summer golf camps hosted by the high school golf coach. My first instructor on golf, my father, would also continue to give me advice. As I moved into my teen years I would watch TV gleaming insight from the swings of professional golfers and then trying to copy those swings and put them into action. Or I would scour the pages of Golf Digest magazine and take tidbits from articles penned by teaching professionals. I filled my head with as much knowledge as I could. Not a bad thing. Our minds were created to be fed. To grow and learn. Yet, the problem I encountered was that when I would finally get on the golf course I would analyze every shot. If the ball swayed left or right of its intended target I would adjust my grip. If I didn't catch a ball cleanly off the ground and instead hit behind it or took too much grass I would adjust my feet

and the position of the ball. The point is that I was too focused on the mechanics, which then impeded my ability to just relax and play this wonderful game. I had the knowledge I needed. I just had to trust that and simply go and play and not think about it. When I finally realized this the game became a lot more enjoyable and believe it or not my scores improved.

In some essence, I think this is part of Paul's message to the young church in Rome. Not how to become a better golfer. But rather that now is the time to respond to God's grace. He has been unpacking a theological treatise, if you will, in the first 11 chapters of his letter about what God has done in Jesus Christ. He has methodically been revealing the mercy of God, which has come through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Their Lord and Savior. Our Lord and Savior. The Messiah. The church's one foundation. What are these "mercies of God" he exhorts his hearers to respond to?

They are:

- Freedom from death (5:12-21)
- Freedom from sin (6:1-23)
- Freedom from a dysfunctional relationship to the law that fosters sin (7:6-25)
- The gift of the Spirit (8:1-17)
- God's plan to conform believers to the Son (8:29), and
- God's faithfulness to keep promises, especially those made to Israel (11:25-29).ⁱ

It is from these mercies that Paul now exhorts the young church to action. Like Peter who was given the faith to proclaim Jesus is the Messiah so, too, has the church been given the wisdom to discern this and now they are to be transformed by that gift and respond to it in worship of God. They are called to act. Trusting God's grace is enough. Salvation has been won through Christ's sacrifice on the cross they are now moved to offer their bodies, their entire being, to God. This is what Paul means when he says we are "to present our bodies as a living sacrifice." No longer is animal sacrifice required. Christ has taken the sin of the world upon himself. That is the grace. Now, be transformed by that grace. Be changed by it. Be filled with it, freed by it, and trust in that grace as the church beats to the gospel of Jesus Christ and does not conform itself by powers and beliefs of the world in which it finds itself.

This isn't easy stuff. We live in a world that is continually telling us how to live our lives. You virtually can't escape the bombardment of advertisements telling us what we need to fit in with the rest of society. No space is off-limits anymore. We fill up our cars with gas and now even the fuel pumps have monitors that promote the latest and greatest gadgets. Or, as I discovered on our recent vacation getaway, even bathrooms now have televisions. Quickly we can be swayed into thinking that new golf club will be the ticket to fixing my game. Or

that pair of jeans will help me fit in with the cool crowd. Or maybe it's the latest generation of vitamin waters or sports drinks that will give us that extra edge we need to keep going, gain more energy, or outlast our competition. Or we can so easily be conformed by all we read on the vast pages of the internet. Who to vote for? What to vote for? Where to eat? Where to buy a car? It's as if we don't even need to think for ourselves at times anymore. The world is doing it for us.

Paul says no to all of this. Don't let the world conform us. Be the people we are in Christ Jesus. Be transformed by the power of grace. Let that guide us and renew our minds so that we can discern God's will. We are called to trust in the gifts of the Spirit which have been given to the church – the people of God. We are to work hand-in-hand together and let those gifts build up one another. Serve one another and serve the world.

Our world, our nation, and even our small community of West Branch is marked by division in so many ways right now. Here at home I think we can all agree it's painful to see just how divided our community is on the upcoming vote of whether to allow the school board to enter into an approximate \$20 million bond. There are painful words being tossed to and fro. People have strong opinions on what the best choice is. Even within our small community of faith we most certainly have people on both sides of the argument. Some for. Some

against. Some still trying to discern which way to vote in a couple weeks. I have talked to so many who simply say they want this to be over and done with.

Wherever we stand on this particular item of debate is not the issue but how the church operates as the body of Christ in the midst of issues such as this is part of what Paul is getting at I believe. We will have disagreements; but, in the midst of these disagreements we are called to stand together and live as people of Christ. Jesus Christ is who defines us. In him is where we find our identity. We are a people rooted in his love. We are called to be a people who love. People who forgive. People who are made holy and acceptable to God because of the mercies of God revealed in Jesus Christ. People who can set aside all the things of the world that tend to separate us from one another and simply act for the good of the gospel. Simply do that for which we were created for. Simply let go of those things that distract us and respond to the grace of God by being the people of God. Proclaiming Jesus as Messiah. Christ crucified and risen. The Easter message.

¹ Mark Reasoner, Commentary on Romans 12:1-8; www.workingpreacher.org