

HOW TO BE THE CHURCH

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O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infects our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in the bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on the earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- The Book of Common Prayer, p.815

The past few weeks in fact most of the summer watching the news has been downright depressing. If I was one of those who believed in the rapture I might be thinking about preparing to be transported to heaven, or at least hoping I would be. However since I'm not one of those I suppose I will not be able to wait to be rescued but instead may have to actually try to do something about what I can to help change this horribly broken world, but known of us can do it alone. The prayer I opened with is from our prayer book page 815. This is my prayer and I have added it to my morning prayers. This is what I hope and pray for but how, how do we begin to do this. Paul in his letter to the Romans especially beginning with chapter 12 gives us some very good guidelines on first of all living in harmony within our own walls.

For the past several weeks we have been hearing bits and pieces of Romans. Romans is probably Paul's most well developed statement of theology and short of the church councils that were to come formed the basis of Christian theology for the early church and that is why he wrote Romans.

Most of these passages in fact all of Romans up until chapter 12 have been a teaching about the Gospel to the Gentiles in Rome. Now Paul moves to the exhortation portion of the letter and tells them what life lived and informed by the gospel should be like.

There is a basic premise a lens if you will that I would like you to read Romans through. Jesus never once tells his disciples to worship him. No Jesus asks the disciples and us to follow him. This is a huge difference and is at the heart of today's passage from Romans.

Here is our same passage, but in the translation from the Message I believe this will make everything easier to understand.

"Rom. 12:1 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. 2 Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best

out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

3 I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

Rom. 12:4 In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. 5 The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, 6 let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; 7 if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; 8 if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face."

There are two clear messages at the start. Our lives are an offering to God. There is no more need for sacrificing animals or other things to appease God. We are the offering, our lives are the offering. However it is a call to see God in the little things of our daily lives. The second is a call from Paul to transcend this world, to not allow the world to drag us down. Peterson says not to become so well adjusted to the culture that we fit in without thinking or questioning.

In today's polarized world it is so easy to get sucked into the arguments of one side or another and never really thinking critically about what each side is saying. I'm certainly guilty of that and my knee jerk reaction to much of what gets said about the many issues proves it. As Peterson says it is easy to let this drag you down into the immaturity of the culture around us and there certainly is a lot of immaturity going around. He really is asking us to step back and take a deep breath and ask what are the fruits of what is going on and how can we address that.

He then says that God brings out the best in us. Unfortunately there are a lot of people where this is not true, but this is not God's fault. This is because they are not working from a loving relationship with God. So what does it mean to allow God to bring out the best in you? How do we do that? We start by thanking God that he made us the way we are and remembering as somebody said once, "God doesn't make junk!" We are not junk we are made in God's image even when we forget that. We are defined by what

God has done for us not what we do for God. What we do should be a response to God and God's love.

Finally Paul goes into the metaphor as the church as a body and each of us as an individual part of that body. Each of us has a role to play and is an essential part of the body. We all have different gifts. You may want me up here preaching but I can tell you it's a good thing Grace and Nancy handle the money. Crunching numbers is not one of my gifts, but is essential to our church functioning. Paul's call is for us to celebrate our gifts and to use them to follow Jesus and to help others follow Jesus.

Then finally he comes to the part about how we are to use our gifts and Peterson has obviously spent time in our contemporary churches for he takes a straight forward sentence and really pegs how so many churches function or don't function as the case may be.

Listen again: If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; 7 if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; 8 if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.

Part of me thinks I should start every meeting off with this little piece. God's work is hard. Living a Gospel life is a challenge and there is a lot of evil out there in the world that wants to throw a wrench in the works. We must be careful at all times to remember we are all one body, one church. It is when we forget this that we get in trouble and sin enters the picture. And sin does this through little things, a small grudge, a complaint, a I know better how to do whatever.

This is all at the heart of what Richard Rohr teaches in so much of his writing. He calls for us to cease looking at the world through dualistic eyes. To realize that to be in relationship is more important than being right. To be one church we must acknowledge the other and work with the other even when the other is a pain in the you know where. Without that realization, relationships are broken and they are often broken in the church. That is how evil keeps us from living in the type of gospel community that Paul envisions and the God desires. This is how we can begin to do the work in the world required to make my opening prayer a reality.