

“GPS”

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First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Romans 12:1-13

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. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Justin Martyr, who lived just a few generations after Jesus, was one of the earliest Christian leaders. His writings provide us with the oldest non-biblical description of Christian worship.

“On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”

Our topic today is worship and devotion. Acts of devotion are personal practices, like personal and family prayer, studying scripture and fasting. These devotional acts help us to center on Christ and on what God is up to in our lives. As we practice devotion, God fills us with God’s grace and we come to care more deeply for God’s beloved creation, which in turn leads us to acts of justice and compassion. We talked about these last week.

Devotion is the private aspect of piety. Worship is piety that we practice with others. Acts of worship are things we do together in Christ’s name – things like public worship, the Lord’s Supper and the ministry of the Word which means listening to scripture and to preaching and interpretation.

We gather together to experience God’s presence and power, to celebrate Holy Communion, and to be sent into the world to serve as Christ’s presence. Through worship – through praise, prayer, giving, thanksgiving and blessing – the faith community builds one another up in love. Together, we offer ourselves to God through service to the world that God loves.

I have been studying Paul’s Letter to the Romans this winter, working through it a few verses at a time. As I arrived at and worked my way through chapter 12, I knew I wanted to share this with you. Today’s lesson was actually the foundation for our entire Lenten series.

I learned about GPS this week. Do you use the Global Positioning System? I remember my brother-in-law carrying his Garmin as we walked through the streets of Florence years ago.

GPS is a navigation system that works – in any weather condition, anywhere in the world, 24 hours a day. It works by receiving information transmitted by orbiting satellites and measuring the distance to each satellite by the amount of time it takes to receive a signal. The receiver determines our position and displays it – to measure our route, map a golf course, or find a different way to grandma’s.

We might call God’s Word – revealed in Christ, confirmed by God as Spirit – our GPS for life. God’s Positioning System, GPS, steers us around obstacles, maps out our days and helps us find the best route for our life’s journey. This is what Paul intends when he writes, “Please, take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.”

“Lively offerings,” as I’ll call it, is about a process of daily transformations. We offer ourselves to God as we contend with the things that regularly distract us. We give ourselves to the work of God as Spirit. This offering ourselves involves transforming our minds and doing what is pleasing to God. Real worship, Paul writes, is offering our bodies and all that we do with them. To God. Every day. Radical inward change as we join God through prayer, study, justice and compassion practices.

When we switch from a t-shirt and jeans to a swimsuit, we change on the outside. We’re still the same person; we just look different. When Christ becomes the center of our life, we still look the same but we are changed inside. Our character, our very nature, is reshaped and renewed as we reflect God’s image more closely in our day-to-day living. And, as we take on God’s image and let God’s Word live in us, we find we’re guided by that heavenly GPS. We discern better what pleases God. We follow God’s path more closely.

People have sometimes thought that spiritual worship, as Paul talks about, is a mystical experience. But when we understand that in Greek *spiritual* can mean *rational* or *logical*, we find that it’s something quite different. Think of it this way: offering ourselves completely to God is exactly what thinking creatures would identify as ... appropriate. It’s logical.

Although Paul writes in Greek, this idea of lively offerings is not at all Greek. The Greeks believed that only the soul mattered and that it was trapped in the body. As Christians, we believe that both body and soul are important. God created our physical bodies and breathed life into them. Both are sacred. Our bodies are vessels for God as Spirit, vehicles through which she works. (I say *she* because in the Hebrew language the word for spirit is feminine.)

Think about this space. It was built 50 years ago to offer worship to God. Yet it was designed by an architect’s. Laborers and artisans built it. Mind, body and spirit came together to create this sanctuary for our worship. This kind of whole-person everyday worship is holy. It gives pleasure to God and as we offer our best selves regularly, God’s image in us grows.

What does it mean to present our bodies as lively offerings on a daily basis?

Members of the body of Christ – that’s the church – offer living worship by practicing the kind of gifts-sharing that Paul talks about. Each person uses their gifts on behalf of the whole community. Like the building of this sanctuary, this worship involves both mind and body.

Saying it another way, living worship combines action and imagination, or creativity.

Clear Lake has a community Thanksgiving service every November. Before the service, we'd gather in the old high school gym to set up chairs. You know those large racks of folding chairs? You need partners and a plan to move them. "If he takes one end and I take the other, could you guide from the side?" To succeed, you have to be of one mind. Creative thinking alone won't move the chairs though. Action is required – pulling, pushing, steadying, mid-course correction. The whole project is common work as people with different functions share the same mind.

Shared creativity-in-action does not remove the challenges of living in community. People stack backward. Chairs fall. Tempers flare. Similarly, living in community is difficult. Yet we need everyone's gifts if we're to do what needs to be done. To exclude some – for whatever reason – is cutting off your nose to spite your face.

Paul reminds us that we exist not only as individuals but as members of the body of Christ. Living in Christ, we imagine and live out prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, leading, showing mercy and other such things together. We can do some things alone, but we do them with more discernment and impact as part of a larger body. No one person can do it all. No church can do it all. God empowers each church to do what we are called to do in our own context.

Doing this, we bear witness that we live by a different mindset. By imagining and acting, our bodies declare that we belong to Christ and to each other.

We are embodied creatures. It's a package deal – body and soul. How do you live your worship? Does it reflect what's most valuable to you? Over time, our actions and choices cumulatively create a body of work. When you want to know your innermost values and motives, look at what you do each day in your body.

We live in a culture that promotes conformity. Resistance takes effort. Every day, things in our lives would distract us from the injustice, greed and violence around us. Only God's transformative action, GPS, can disconnect us from things that do not matter.

Usually we think of worship as coming together each Sunday for liturgy, preaching and music. While these are good practices, we are called to be daily, living offerings. As much as we may like our Sunday time together, the quality of our worship is measured by how we live Monday through Saturday rather than by what happens only on Sunday.

That list [*name*] read – prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, leading, showing mercy – is a representative list of gifts that together we possess. They're examples; there are others. Our goal is to offer a body of work together, a living, breathing, daily offering to God.

We do this by saying "not my will but yours." We connect with God by aligning what we do each day with the example Jesus offers us. This is the guide God offers us – our GPS for life. Will we keep it in the glove box or on our dashboard?

We're halfway through this season of Lent. Today is a perfect day to start afresh and present ourselves as lively offerings to God.

Amen.