

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
August 23, 2020 12th Sunday after Pentecost

207 South Brodie St. Thunder Bay
<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Words of Welcome

Conforming or transforming. Two words that can mean the difference in how we live and approach life itself. If you are interested in considering your life and its direction this may be a conversation for you. As we prepare to ponder this, join me in a call to worship.

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!

<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Proper16A>

Hymn

O God beyond all praising

448

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| 1. God beyond all praising,
we worship you today
and sing the love amazing
that songs cannot repay,
for we can only wonder
at every gift you send,
at blessings without number
and mercies without end.
We lift our hearts before you
and wait upon your word;
we honour and adore you,
our great and mighty Lord. | 2. Then hear, O gracious Saviour;
accept the love we bring,
that we who know your favour
may serve you as our king,
and whether our tomorrows
be filled with good or ill,
we'll triumph through our sorrows
and rise to bless you still:
to marvel at your beauty
and glory in your ways,
and make a joyful duty
our sacrifice of praise. |
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Opening Prayer

Eternal God,
you are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow,
and yet you come to us afresh each new day.
You breathe new life into what has grown tired and discouraged.
You offer healing for what is broken and worn.
You restore hope for what seems impossible.
You are the source of life and love for us and all your creatures.

Merciful God, we confess that we have strayed from your purposes.
You set a path for us to follow, but we conform to the ways of this world.
You offer us your transforming love, but we cling to familiar patterns and habits.
You give each of us gifts to use for the work of your kingdom,
but we wait for others to do what needs doing.
Forgive us for taking the easy way out and failing to serve you with eager hearts.
Open our hearts and minds to your word for us in this time
as we worship you, Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit,
one God, now and always. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

God is the giver of MANY gifts.
God is the Creator of the ONE body.
God is slow to anger and quick to forgive.
God helps us to share and honour the gifts of all,
God helps us to heal the wounds and reunite the body.
We are forgiven, loved, and accepted.
Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen

~ posted by Rev Gord on his blog, **Worship Offerings**. <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>

Scripture Reading Romans 12:1-8 - Mairi Gerow

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.
²Do 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.

³For 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. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

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The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Message A Living Sacrifice

Spoiler alert if you have not seen the movie *Gran Torino* starring Clint Eastwood as Walt Kowalski, but it was released in 2008 so you have had time to see it. Walt is an old racist widower who ends up befriended by an immigrant family that has moved in next door. Near the end of the movie Walt makes the ultimate sacrifice, putting himself in a place of harm by provoking a gang that has been intimidating the family. They kill him in a spray of gunfire, but with witnesses emboldened by Walt's sacrifice, the gang members are arrested and the family and neighbourhood now safe.

When we think of sacrifice we often go straight to the extreme. Sacrifices usually mean death, though we may on a less morbid tone speak of sacrifice in terms of sacrificing birthday cake for the good of a diet, or sacrificing things we would enjoy for the hope of a college fund for our children. Still, history and the movies have shown us many examples of sacrifice that are more about giving one's life for another or for an ideal.

Ancient cultures used sacrifice, both human and animal, as a way to appease the gods. The Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament in the Bible, are filled with stories of sacrifice, notably animal sacrifice, not as a way to appease God, but rather as a way to atone for sin or to cover over sin in order to approach God who is holy. For Christians, one of our understandings of the cross is that it was the ultimate sacrifice, which meant that our sins were forgiven once for all. No more would the blood sacrifice of animals be needed in our relationship with God to cover over sin. Please note however, there is more to the cross than this one image alone.

This history of sacrifice and death make it all the more stunning to read a line in a letter written to the believers in ancient Rome which uses the words "living sacrifice". How can one be a living sacrifice and what does that mean? The context of these words is, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." There is a lot to unpack in just that phrase, but basically it means that we respond to God by living in a way that reflects God's kingdom of grace and mercy. It means that we sacrifice our living to God's will and wisdom in a way that is fitting or logical, reflecting the character of God which is steadfast, loving, and abundant in grace and mercy.

Spiritual worship is a way of living that informs every one of our days, decisions, thoughts and actions. Even once Sunday worship begins after months of being able to sleep in or relax it will be a spiritual and sacrificial act to begin a habit of getting up on Sunday morning to get to church. I know that for all of us it is easier to just roll over knowing that there will be an online version of worship, but coming to church if you feel that it is safe to do so, is a small act of sacrifice.

It is said that the problem with a living sacrifice is that you can walk away from the altar. That is the challenge in choosing to live sacrificially, it means that you have to make

choices. It is the difference between being conformed to the ways of the worlds or being transformed by the renewing of our minds. It is far easier to conform than transform.

To conform means that one is obedient or compliant, to act in a way that doesn't rock the boat. It holds to the prevailing standards or customs of a family, friendship group, or society as a whole. Conforming is not always easy as we may find ourselves following in ways that we know are not helpful or healthy, but it can appear to be easier to conform than to step away and make different choices.

It is not that conforming to all social etiquettes and behaviours is bad, rather it is about being conscious of the ways we conform to others expectations in our close personal contacts or in the broader society and whether or not that fits in with what is the will of God. Is what we choose good and acceptable and perfect when it comes to determining how one lives, that we may discern what is the will of God?

When we choose, we also give ourselves opportunity to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. That renewing allows for discernment. I was once asked, "What does it mean to discern something when it comes to God and faith?" It is not really a simple answer, and I don't know if I can adequately address it, but its parts have to do with taking time to pray, read scripture, listen for God's response, which can come in many forms and often through the wisdom of others. It is about using our minds and our hearts to determine a way forward. It is something that you get better at with time, patience, and practice. Discerning the will of God will always mean that your answers will be good, acceptable, and perfect in contrast to hurtful, vengeful, or selfish.

Transformation brings freedom where conforming restricts. Transformation is choosing to serve God not out of a sense or place of obligation but from a sense that whatever we sacrifice in our living is a reasonable response to God's mercy and God's grace in our lives.

What I think is both misunderstood and a mystery of the Christian faith is that faith brings freedom, not freedom from suffering or the realities of the world, but freedom to choose ways of living that are life-giving. Freedom to know that we are forgiven, loved, and able to reflect that same love, hope, and mercy into the world. Freedom to let go of what has been and trust that God's got this.

As one leans into trusting God, living for God, sacrificing for God, there is more joy, hope, and sense of a life filled with adventure, even if that adventure happens merely in conversations over the telephone or takes you to a country to help in ways that bring life and hope to others, and all the possibilities in-between.

There is one more piece to all that the Apostle Paul has been writing...your life has meaning and purpose beyond yourself and it is through being transformed that we

humbly place ourselves in a position to be active participants in transforming our households, churches, communities, and wherever our influence extends. Each of us has been given gifts to be used in relationship with others. This is where the Christian faith differs from those who might just consider themselves “spiritual”. People who are Christians cannot see themselves apart from others who are working together to be fully functioning God reflecting human beings as N.T. Wright would say.

Christians do not choose to live in isolation from one another. Our calling is to community whether it be the local church or a in a much broader sense. We may work or participate in organizations that make change or not, but our strength and witness come from our relationships with one another and the desire to share with others the freedom, the transformation we have found in Christ. We do this through our choices, by our words and actions.

Please note that the list of gifts Paul shares is not an exhaustive list. It is a list to help you consider what is it that God has given you to use to lift up the whole body of Christ, all its members. I do not have every gift needed to fully reflect God to the world. It takes all of our gifts, to reflect fully the character, grace, and mercy of God to individuals and the world.

It is not even just about one church, it is about all churches, all Christians working in a way that reflects God’s grace and mercy to the world. It is easy to become judgemental when we see things in other denominations that we think are not helpful, but none of us has a corner on perfection or being right. It takes all of us to be the body of Christ.

So, we reflect God. It is an embodied faith. We live out our faith using our minds to be informed and transformed and our bodies to be the instruments that God uses to bring hope and healing to a world that is in desperate need of goodness, of sacrifice that values not only ourselves, but the lives of others as well. How we act, what we do, is grounded in God’s mercy, love, and grace. We present our bodies, our minds, as praise to God and a living sacrifice which is our spiritual worship. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

Closing Prayer

Life-giving God, you equip your people with gifts to work for your kingdom, bringing justice and peace to every land and community.

Through your Spirit, O God, you give the gift of prophecy. Help us to use this gift to speak words of justice and truth into situations where people are exploited or treated unfairly. Guide our actions so that we might influence change for good in the world, and bring hope to the hopeless.

You give the gift of serving, O God, in the example of your Son Jesus. Help us to use this gift to serve those who have been cast aside by structures of power and privilege. Increase our awareness of injustice and our dedication to work with those who suffer its effects. May the abundance we share in our country touch every life and community in this land.

God of wisdom, you give the gift of teaching. Help us to use this gift to ensure that every child has access to education and opportunity. Be with every teacher and every student in the coming months as schools adapt to the challenges of COVID-19. Support creative teaching and diligent learning in every school and centre for learning.

God of hope, you give the gift of encouragement. Help us to use this gift to hearten all who are struggling in these difficult days. Bless us with words and actions to bring comfort to all who mourn, to those coping with mental or physical illness, and to any who feel isolated or left behind.

God of purpose and promise, you give the gift of leadership. Help us to use this skill to build up our communities and model respectful ways of living and loving. Show us how our churches can be places of support within our neighbourhoods.

God of love, you give the gift of kindness. Help us be kind to all who cross our paths, even those who anger or upset us. Teach us to be forgiving and reconciling in all our relationships.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray...

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

The Letter to the Romans reminds us that we all have gifts to share.

When we give, we give generously.

When we feel compassion for those in need, we give cheerfully.

Let us share what we have to offer to God generously and cheerfully, so that God's good work may continue.

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If you would like to make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information.

Hymn

I'm gonna live so God can use me

648

1. I'm gonna live so live so God can use
me anywhere, Lord, anytime!
I'm gonna live so live so God can use me
anywhere, Lord, my Lord anytime!
2. I'm gonna work so work so God can use
me anywhere, Lord, anytime!
I'm gonna work so work so God can use me
anywhere, Lord, (my Lord) anytime!
3. I'm gonna pray so pray so God can use
me anywhere, Lord, anytime!
I'm gonna pray so pray so God can use me
anywhere, Lord, my Lord anytime!
4. I'm gonna sing so sing so God can use
me anywhere, Lord, anytime!
I'm gonna sing so sing so God can use me
anywhere, Lord, my Lord anytime!

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Benediction

Though we are many, *Rom. 12:5–6*
remember that we are one body in Christ
and members of one another.

Offer your gifts according to the grace given you,
as a living sacrifice to God. *Rom. 12:1*

May God who restores,
Christ who calls,
and the Spirit who empowers
bless you
and increase your joy and gladness, *Isa. 51:3*
now and always.

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