

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ Rector

Scripture: Romans 12:1-8

"Living the Christian Life"

Have you ever had a struggle where you are trying to decide – one or the other? The Gospel of Matthew chapter 16 or this rich reading from Paul – as he wrote to the Romans in chapter 12. I struggled and struggled and I said "Lord, make it clear to me."

And so what Paul is saying that we should refuse to let today's culture squeeze us and put us into a mold, dictating to us how we should think and what we should think, and then tell us how we can and can't behave. God made it clear. I have said many times from this very pulpit that the Holy Bible is to dictate to culture how we are to behave, how we are to act, what we are to say and do – and it should not be the other way around – where culture would be telling us how we should act, what we should believe, what we are afraid to say. It doesn't work that way! Paul says that instead, we are to be transformed; our minds need to be renewed. This is not like plugging in your iPad so that the battery can be recharged; this not getting your iPhone up to 100%, or updating your apps on it. This is totally different. Our minds need to be changed, renewed, filled. We as believers in Jesus Christ have to be the pacesetters, and work out what kind of people we should be. This should not be what the culture expects of us, but what God in His mercy has done for us.

One of the key phrases in this epistle is '*the patterns of this world.*' In Galatians 1:4 Paul calls this '*the present evil age*'. You only have to turn on the news and there is a lot of stuff going on. It doesn't matter what news you turn on – whether it is something that ends with a "c" or starts with a "c" or has an "x" at the end – it doesn't matter. Like many first-century Jews, Paul believed that world history was divided into '*the present age*', filled with rebellion against God and the corruption and death that come from it, and '*the age to come*', in which God would give new life to the world and humanity, bringing justice, joy and peace once and for all to everyone who believes. Paul thinks that this '*age to come*' had already begun in Jesus, I for one am a firm believer that the 'last days' began when the first nail was driven into Jesus. The clock started then – and this '*ago to come*' - through his death and resurrection – has already started. As Christians, we need to stop letting the world around us dictate the terms and conditions of how we live, but instead we have got to figure out how to think, speak and act appropriately for the '*age to come*' and not for '*the present age.*' As Christians, we are called to be 'counter-cultural.' I get such a thrill - I had subscribed to the Douglas Enterprise a while back when I first got here – it was a gift subscription and then I let it drop. I have restarted my subscription and I have got to tell you there is an article or column in there by someone who is here this morning. Ken, you lift my spirits, 'Cracklin' Bread', right? It is amazing, because I am in agreement as I am reading it, and I am saying 'glory be to God' that someone speaks his mind and gives the glory to God – sometimes as a prayer that he writes. If you haven't seen it – take a look. It is in the Douglas Enterprise – and thank you for writing your mind. It is important because you are not speaking for this '*present age*' – you are speaking for the '*age to come*' – and God bless you for that! You are counter-cultural. And we not supposed to be counter-cultural in everything, as if every single aspect of society and culture were not

completely bad, but at least being prepared to think through each aspect of our lives. We have got to be ready to challenge those parts where the ‘*present age*’ shouts, or even whispers seductively, that it would be easier and better to do things that way, while the ‘*age to come*,’ already begun in Jesus, insists that belonging to the new creation means that we must live - moving beyond our differences and focus our energy on the mission we share as Christians.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, that is why we are in this building today – because the family of Saint Andrew’s said ‘we have had enough!’ I don’t need to go into the details – that is a “whole ‘nother” sermon that we have preached before. God bless you for having the culture for being ‘counter-cultural’ and stand on this - the Holy Bible. That is why we are in this building. It has nothing to do with ‘labels’ or anything else – it has to do with how you believe this is – or what this is. Is this just a bunch of nice stories or is this history? His-Story. We need to never lose sight of the fact why we are here – and God bless you all for carrying that torch forward – whether you were in the congregation on the Day of Pentecost 2013 – or whether you are here today – God bless you! It truly is following God’s will.

The key to all of this is the transforming of the mind. Many Christians today hope that they will be able to live up to something “like” Christian standards - while still being able to fit in and think the way the rest of the world thinks. I’m sorry, but that just can’t be done. Having your mind renewed by the influence of the Holy Spirit is the start of living in God’s loving will for all of His children, and growing up into spiritual maturity. It is the way of life of ‘*the present age*’ which quite often contains real human immaturity, as people simply look at the culture surrounding them, with all its shallow and silly patterns of behavior, and copy it unthinkingly – like lemmings. For Paul, the mind and the body are closely interconnected, and must work as a coherent team. Having your mind renewed and offering God your body are all part of the same event. Paul says that you can’t just put your finger on the altar of sacrifice and say ‘I give you this God.’ No – it has got to be the whole self and it has to be brought willingly and lovingly to God. The whole self must be laid on the altar like a sacrifice in the Temple. The big difference is that, usually the sacrifice is killed, but the Christian’s self-offering is all about ‘coming alive’ with the new life in Christ that bursts forth once the evil deeds of the self are put to death. Christian living begins with offering of your whole self to God - whose mercy has come all the way - meeting us in our rebellion, sin and death – running to us like the father of the Prodigal Son. The son comes home all humbles and humiliated – the father sees him and he doesn’t stand there like ‘come, kiss my ring’ – but instead he runs to meet him – he runs after him! We are enabled to think straight, instead of the twisted thinking that the world forces upon us, and to act accordingly. There is a wideness in God’s mercy – the Holy Spirit gave us that song to sing this morning – and it is indeed true. We as Christians need to understand that we are called to live as different members of a single family. Being loved unconditionally by the Creator should make you feel special enough.

Paul uses this image of the body with its limbs and organs to stress that the church is Body made up of quite different members. In verse 5 Paul says: “*So in Christ we who are many form one body.*” The picture of ‘body and members’ is Paul’s way of speaking about the new human

life which the church is to live and model before the world. Paul has been saying throughout the letter to the Romans about the coming together of Jew and Gentile in the Messiah – as one. That unity is based on the fact that Christians all have the same faith that Jesus is the risen Messiah and Lord. The Body of Christ is made up of people from every ethnic, cultural, social, racial, geographic, gender, and denominational group – and really is a beautiful picture of those who have been purchased with the blood of Jesus – “*from every tribe and language and people and nation.*” (Revelation 5:9) However different people may be - all Christians share this faith which is the ground of their unity and co-operation. One of the lessons I have learned right here in Douglas, is that unity in the Coffee County Ministerial Association – where pastors from all kinds of Christian Churches gather in the unity of faith. We all share the belief that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, He is ‘*the way, the truth and the life*’ and there is no argument about that. We don’t say that He is one of many ways to the Father – He is the THE way to the Father. We share that belief and the Bible is the Word of God. Our faith crosses denominational and color barriers. We grow as one body of Christ together – praying, teaching, sharing and caring for each other – we are pastors pastoring to each other. The world around us loves to force us into disunity but we must once more be transformed by having our minds renewed, and that way, as we learn the lessons of unity, we may might discover how to put them into effect.

God’s grace often enhances the abilities and passions that people already have; but sometimes, when God’s Holy Spirit fills someone’s life, new gifts emerge that they or anyone else could ever have imagined. We need to recognize and value, as a church, these different gifts – and that those who have been given them should use them in the service of the church, as part of that sacrificial self-offering that Paul spoke of at the start of this portion of his letter to the Romans. But here comes the hard part: it isn’t always as easy as it sounds. People need to recognize not only their gifts – but their passions and how that would fit in – and then serve in that manner. Putting effort into a ministry that doesn’t feel right – but you are doing it because there is no one else – will burn you out. God doesn’t want you to burn out – but instead He wants a burning desire for you to serve that way.

It is wonderful to see the ways in which God provides different graces and gifts, and the church benefits. Paul lists several: “*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.*” (Romans 12:6-8) Whatever the gift - If you’re talking about Jesus, you should be clear what the Christian faith teaches about Him and not contradict it. Exercising gifts is never a matter simply of letting ‘inspiration’ take over. Most of these tasks involve hard work, and Paul encourages his readers to get ready for it. The passage has a ‘get-your-sleeves-rolled up’ feel to it. Find out what your task is and give yourself to it whole heartedly. It is important to plan the work, think it through, get up early and get to it. Expect to work till you’re tired, and to keep at it even on the days when you’re not in the mood! And I know a lot of people in this room who do just that – to the glory of God. You can’t just play at it

when you ‘feel like it’. Christian service isn’t a hobby, though people sometimes think of it like that. Exercising your gifts is a divine calling, and if that calling is hospitality - to make cups of coffee after church, that needs to be done with energy, care and flair. People with a gift of teaching shouldn’t just expect to be able to stand up and say whatever they think at the time; they need to prepare their material, always be working at filling in gaps, seeing a larger picture, and being able to communicate it better.

Nothing weakens Christian work as much as a gloomy face – or a false painted on smile. The word for ‘sincere’ in verse 9 means quite literally ‘unhypocritical’. Can you see how this could present a problem for many people today.

- If I really don’t like someone, they say, how can I love them?
- If I’m commanded to love them, and try to act as if I do, doesn’t that make me a hypocrite?

Paul’s answer to that is ‘love’ is more about what people do than about how they feel. In fact, in the early church ‘love’ was often connected directly to helping other people out in their different needs, some of which was financial, rather than necessarily to having warm feelings towards them. As a Christian, it is possible, through prayer, to decide firmly that you are going to help someone in need, whether or not you particularly like them. That can be done coldly and patronizingly, but again and again in Christian experience we see that when we behave towards someone as though we really did love them, then, to our surprise, love, care and concern for the other person’s welfare quickly springs up. Talk about a transformation!

If we waited until we were absolutely sure that our motives were completely pure and right we might never actually get around to doing anything at all. In verses 9 and 10 – immediately following today’s reading - Paul says: *“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”* (Romans 12:9-10) I think it is important that the kind of love that Paul is speaking of is not physical or ‘brotherly’ love – but the Greek word is ἀγάπη (agape) and it means unconditional love. There are no strings attached.

You can’t get simpler, or clearer, than that. Paul assumes that everybody knows that there are many things that are evil and many that are good. Christians need to be reminded that they are not exempt from following the basic human moral standards that almost all societies recognize. They are to be showing the rest of the world what a genuine human life looks like. The Apostle Peter puts it this way: *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”* (1 Peter 4:8-11)