

ARRIVING AT SELF WORTH

Text: Romans 12:1-8

11/8/09

Introduction

I used to watch the never ending talent show “American Idol” all the time, but I don’t anymore. And the only way I can explain it is what I call the “cringe factor”. Never have so many people, with so little talent, earnestly believed that they are great singers. They would start their audition and I would find myself reaching for the pillow on the sofa, put it over my face, and say “make it stop, make it stop!”

When the judges gave them their predictably awful review, so many of these folks were truly devastated. Their self-worth was in tatters. It was as if they had never seriously considered the possibility that they were awful. I couldn’t help but think, “Doesn’t anybody in your world love you enough to tell you that a recording career is not in your future?” Sing in the shower, sing in a crowd, sing in the car by yourself with the radio on...but don’t be so deluded as to think someone would stand in line to watch you do this.

This is the time of year in the church when we focus on self-worth in the most literal sense; and not just financial. It’s when we take stock of ourselves, the sum total of who we are, and what we can offer to the mission of God in our world. And some of us fear it as much as a bad review on American Idol.

I’d like to help you arrive at your self-worth today. I’d like to help you make an offering to the one talent judge who really matters with the confidence and satisfaction that comes from knowing you’ve given something of great value. You can make an offering today that will receive heaven’s rave reviews.

1. It starts with the right understanding of the love of God. God's love for us is so extensive it seeks a whole-bodied offering in return.

...brothers, in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...

If you are wondering what God wants from you today, the answer is all of you. Is that so surprising? Deep love seeks a deep response. You didn't pledge you deep love to your spouse thinking she'd offer 3/4th in return did you? No, you expected her to pledge all she knew of herself to all she knew of you.

That term "sacrifice" is from the language of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. A Jewish worshipper of God in the Apostle Paul's time would bring a goat, grain offering, or bird and place it on the altar of sacrifice as an expression of thanks and devotion for the grace and mercy of God.

But Paul is calling for a "*living sacrifice*". He's taking the altar out of the temple and putting it in your living room. God's not simply asking for your religious life. He's asking for your whole life. The love of God, the salvation we've received in Jesus Christ is so profound; it seeks your whole life in return.

I'm talking about your "bodily potential". God seeks our love in all our thinking, feeling, and doing. When I work, study, parent, or exercise do I do it out of love for God? Do you sense God's pleasure in you as you do all those things? That's the living sacrifice; taking all that we are capable of and handing it over to God as an act of devotion. That's following the way of Jesus Christ, who pleased God and knew God's pleasure.

When we put God at the center of our thought, work, recreation, and relationships, that's the whole-bodied kind of love we are called to offer our Creator. Not offering 3/4th's of a life but the whole thing the best way we know how.

There's so much more to your "self-worth" before God, than what you can drop in the plate during worship. The God of love seeks you; all of you.

2. An offering of this sort won't fit neatly in an offering plate. You'll have to spread it around. And one place we're called to make our offering is in the rest of the church.

Verses 3-6 of our text are critical for getting this straight. The reason you can make an offering worthy of heaven's applause is that you have been given "grace", and that grace has an effect in your life that makes you the right kind of "living sacrifice".

In verse 3 Paul calls us to look for and possess our gifts in a spirit of humility. Why? The gifts were given to us to make us interdependent parts of one body: *so in Christ we who are many form one body and each belongs to the other.*

Each belongs to the other. That's why we are gifted – to find and take our place in the one body of Christ. This is so important. God forgive us for teaching generations of lay people that their job was to "pray, pay, and obey" while the professional clergy did the heavy lifting. In fact you'll have to look hard in the New Testament to find any "lay people" at all. All were called to their various ministries in the one body of Christ.

I'm not going to explore each gift in detail, and please realize that this is not an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts. But I do want you to see in verses 6-8 that they cluster into two basic kinds: speech and service. Prophesying, teaching, and encouraging are the mouthy gifts. Serving, contributing, leading, and showing mercy are the service gifts.

My friend, no matter how many left feet you think you have, you are a person gifted for God's church. God's love for you makes it so. But don't expect the gift to arrive neatly wrapped. You'll need to act on the stirrings and leadings you sense in yourself to help figure out what it is that God wants from you. If you feel called to lead, please don't duck the new community outreach. If you feel called to teach, don't be a stranger when we look for small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, or mentors. If you are called to mercy don't sit silently until one of us staff folks is smart enough to figure it out. In other words take a chance! And in that risk taking your gifts will emerge.

There's more to stewardship than what goes in the plate, no matter how generous you are. Everyone here has a living sacrifice that will be beautiful and acceptable because it is a response to God's living sacrifice for us made through his son Jesus Christ.

- 3. So we need to make a "living sacrifice" in the church. But that's not all. The church was never meant to contain all your gifts. Stewardship is also a call to make our living sacrifices in God's world.**

Stewardship of our lives before God can never be limited to our religious behavior, as important as that is. Jesus didn't come to his disciples and say "follow me to church". He simply said "follow me".

If we've tried to say anything this fall in our congregation, it's that. Through the "What is Missional?" sermon series and classes, through the "My 95" Events, even the big map out there in the lobby, we're doing every thing we know how to do to get the message across that the fundamental character of the church is the "sent" people of God. Jesus did not invite the world to come to church; he invited the church to come to the world.

I wish for each of us the struggle, as often as necessary, with the question "*Am I doing with my life what God wants me to do?*" If we never ask that question, we've missed a large part of the Christian faith. If we never ask that question our stewardship will always be too small, no matter how we try to add it up.

How's it with going with the "living sacrifice" of your life? Two-thirds of it will be spent doing something other than sleeping. Are we yielding increasing amounts of it as an offering to the God we know in Christ? That's stewardship, that's discipleship, that's spiritual growth.

When I was in Denver I got to know an orthodontist. He spends time every year in Romania doing dentistry on poor kids with AIDS. In fact he, in partnership with a few other dentists, has built a clinic in Romania and employed out of their own pockets a dentist to staff it. Each year he takes a team of medical students and interested volunteers. And when he learns of a kid who's having family problems at home, that comes through his practice, he takes a couple of them as well.

The really wonderful thing this man knows is that he doesn't have to leave his office to make a living sacrifice to Jesus Christ. God's in the church and God's in the world. And he's just waiting for our stewardship to take us where he is.

Living sacrifices. They are difference between the faith that remains a hobby and the faith that becomes a lifestyle.

Conclusion

Stewardship. Ah, it's time to talk about money, we think to ourselves. And we agree to grin and bear it for another year.

Or maybe it's the secret to discovering a life that really adds up; one that is so much more than "pray, pay, and obey". Numerous folks in this congregation have made that discovery for themselves. And lots of us need to.

Years ago Alexander Irvine wrote a novel called *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*. The heroine of the novel goes to a mourning neighbor, and comforting her puts her hand on her head and says:

God takes a hand wherever he can find it and does just what he likes with it. Sometimes he takes a bishop's hand and lays it on a child's head in benediction. And then he takes the hand of a doctor to relieve the pain, the hand of a mother to guide a child. And sometimes he takes the hand of a poor old creature like me to give comfort to a neighbor. But they're all hands touched by his Spirit, and his Spirit is everywhere looking for hands to use.

What do your hands have to offer?