**HYPE, HOPE AND BULL REMOLDED**

August 7, 2016

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

12th Sunday of Pentecost

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

Romans 12 – J. B. Phillips

A

l turned to Fred with a pretty simple question as they plopped down their lap tops at the Coffee Mug café, and asked, “Well Fred, I’m not quite sure what I should do for our 40th wedding anniversary. And Fred being helpful as usual responded, “Well, Al what did you do for your 25th?”

He said, "I took my wife to Hawaii."

Fred pushed further, "Then what are you thinking about for your 40th?"

He said, "Well I was thinking about bringing her back."

Nothing like that happens to be the case for Martha and me or for Anne and David Ferris either. We have anniversaries to celebrate this morning and so there will be a simple anniversary cake in fellowship hall after worship.

Martha and I were married in Bay Village, Ohio at the Bay Presbyterian Church where her father was the pastor. Lots of people from the congregation came since the invitation to them was rather open. You couldn’t just make an invitation to some members of the church and not others. Martha’s mother had sowed her wedding gown and the bride was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She still is. Martha was escorted down the aisle by her father and received in the chancel by mine. The processional was not Trumpet Tune by Jeremiah Clarke, but a hymn tune, “All Creatures of Our God and King.” I considered having it as our opening hymn this morning.

We considered what hymns might be sung during that wedding service. Whenever Martha’s uncles and extended family gathered they always sang, the hymn, *Trust and Obey*. However the thought of listing “Trust and Obey” in the wedding bulletin felt strangely odd, especially when there was this political world view beginning to float that one should trust, but verify. There was a big reception in the church’s fellowship hall with a beautiful, magnificent cake prepared by Hough’s Bakers of Cleveland and simply punch, nuts, mints, coffee and tea. Immediate family gathered at Martha’s home for a late lunch when the reception concluded and at her home the family sang, “Trust and Obey” before we took off on a honeymoon evening to Atwood Lake Lodge in New Philadelphia, Ohio. However rather than pause around this hymn, we’ll get to the scripture that was read at our wedding.

No, that wasn’t Psalm 50. Maybe you did a double take on Psalm 50, verse 1 which was used as our responsive call to worship this morning. It is part of today’s standard lectionary reading, but in the Revised Standard Version the verse 9 says, “*I will accept no bull from your house.*” Of course this isn’t referring to our speech, but is instead a reference that God is the God of all creation and really doesn’t need to have animals slaughtered by us so that God might feel honored. Indeed God says to us through the poetry of David that every beast of the forest is actually his and that all of the cattle on a thousand hills are his as well. God asks, “Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?”

God’s presence with us today is spirit and as spirit God doesn’t need us to bring something God has himself created. Instead, says the Psalmist, God desires a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a sacrifice of ourselves as we offer to God the best of our service to others.

But when we get to the New Testament and unwrap the letters of Paul, we begin to see how this sacrifice of self and this attitude might be lived in our behavior. We even encounter it in the passage from Romans 12 this morning.

Now, there is a reason why we broke with our lectionary readings and read from Romans today, as intimated, we did so because this was the text that Martha and I asked to be read at our wedding and we asked that it be read in the J. B. Phillips translation because the points that the author drives feel clearer there.

*With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers and sisters, as an act of intelligent worship, to give God your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him.*

God doesn’t need any bull, no matter how we take that verse, in Psalm 50, but a sacrifice of our bodies for service to be consecrated and acceptable is what God has in mind. Then what follows is the verse that Martha and I have quoted often to our children.

*Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.*

This is a biblical way of saying, “Are you going to do what everybody else seems to think is right?” “Just because someone wants to jump off a bridge doesn’t mean that you must as well.” These verses seem to be saying, “Just because that is popular opinion, doesn’t make it the way you should be. Think for yourself a little here. Don’t be intimidated by the world’s values, but what God values.” Then Paul outlines the kind of life and relationships that will provide some evidence of our desire, intention and response that are these living sacrifices.

Beginning with verse 9 Paul recommends that we begin with “genuine love” (v. 9). He says it this way, “Let us have no imitation Christian love.” Being genuine is important to God. Paul then expands on this by telling us to hate what is evil; to cling to what is good and to love one another. We are encouraged to be zealous and show each other honor. He follows this with a brief but clear list: be ardent, offer service, rejoice in hope and be patient in suffering. We are encouraged to contribute to the needs of the “saints” and extend hospitality to strangers.

But Paul’s not done. He has a whole set of additional recommendations and advice in verses 14-21:

• bless those who persecute you
• do not curse those who persecute you
• rejoice with those who rejoice
• weep with those who weep
• live in harmony
• don’t be stuck-up
• mingle with the less fortunate
• don’t think you’re so smart
• don’t repay evil with evil
• live peaceably with all
• don’t take revenge
• feed your hungry enemies
• give drink to the thirsty enemies
• don’t be overcome with evil
• overcome evil with good[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here scripture outlines attitudes that would change the tenor of any political campaign no matter what the party. How wonderful if some in positions of responsibility could catch wind of that phrase, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold!

So what would our world look like if we were to begin being living sacrifices? Perhaps it looks like this:

Betty Meadows, general presbyter of Mid-Kentucky Presbytery (a position similar, in some ways, to bishop in other traditions), describes a summer sabbatical that transformed her life. She left her churchy world behind and went “under cover” for three months, working as a Waffle House hostess. To her surprise, as she put it, “the risen Christ showed up every day.”

A van broke down in the parking lot, on the Fourth of July, carrying a family from Alabama. No garage or mechanic could be found. A waitress heard of their plight and called her boyfriend. He arrived 15 minutes later and fixed their van, for the price of a cup of coffee.

“The mechanic and the waitress are living sacrifices,” writes Betty.

A lawyer set up shop in the Waffle House, offering legal help to the needy of the community, for what they could pay — or for no payment at all, if they couldn’t afford it.

“Every Tuesday,” writes Betty, “this lawyer sat at a table, meeting client after client, turning away no one.” He is a living sacrifice.

A woman hobbled into the restaurant, a cast on one leg, but displaying signs of other medical difficulties. The police had just arrested her boyfriend for drunken driving and had impounded his truck. She was turned out on the street, with nowhere to go. The restaurant was so busy, none of the staff could give her a ride to the bus station, but she called her landlord, who lived an hour and a half away. He dropped everything, and drove right over to pick her up.

“When the landlord arrived,” writes Betty, “I said to him, ‘How kind of you to drive so far for one of your tenants.”

“The man looked puzzled. And then he said, ‘Why wouldn’t I?’ Here is a landlord who is a living sacrifice.

Sometimes I have concluded that there are two sources of belief as we experience them. Hopefully our belief systems are rooted in scripture and in the advice of our money, “In God we trust.” But speaking more philosophically we might say that the two sources might be describes ad one of them in the head and the other in the heart. Now I suppose that if you were to take this to some psychologists they would tell you that all thinking and feeling ultimately comes from the head, but you would know better wouldn't you? You'd realize that experience has taught you that some things you just feel and others you calculate through reason. You know what I mean. Belief in God is both intellectual and moral - it abides both in reason and emotion.

Schubert Ogden made a distinction between what he calls belief in "the top of our mind" and belief in "the bottom of our heart." Our minds may pose as a radical skeptic, but our unexamined assumptions about the goodness of life and its proper values may demonstrate that, in the bottom of our hearts, we believe that life has meaning. The most unsatisfactory thing about non-belief is that it is essentially about nothing, whereas for most of humankind there seems to be a permanent sympathy with meaning, a need to affirm rather than deny. In other words, the is this lingering feeling that there is a God who gives meaning to life and this seems to correspond to the way we actually experience life our lives. Hopefully, in gratitude for God we would seek to be “living sacrifices” as Paul describes it. How might this work?

Most of you are aware that several of us have just returned from a mission trip to the Rehema InStep orphanage near Sibanga, just outside of Kitale, Kenya. Our reason for going was to build a dairy to help the orphanage be more self-sufficient. By having their own milk and milk products the orphanage could not only feed the children (and there are about 170 of them), but also have some extra to sell in the community. That income would help support the orphanage.

Currently the orphanage has 21 cows – 8 of whom were being milked. It was our goal to build a milking barn and station, but to also modernize and improve their production with the introduction of a milking machine. There were four wakulima ng’ombe, or cattle farmers who milked the cows by hand. This wasn’t consistently sanitary. As they squeezed utters it was easy for cow hair, mud and other things to get into the milk. The introduction of a milking machine brought stainless steel sealed containers and the washing and disinfecting of utters. It was a whole new process.

The men would use sticks to poke and prod the cows to come for milking. Of course the cows were a bit resistant. William Berkemeier a farmer with 60 cows from Upstate New York was with us and he taught these Kenyan man that loving the cows was more productive than poking and prodding them. He showed the men how he would coax in a cow, wash her, then speak softly to her and stroke her. When he demonstrated his technique and hooked up the milking machine and four of those cups were attached to the first cow’s utters, she let out a high pitched, “Moooooooooooo.” Within four days the cows started to line up to be milked and within those first four days of Will’s approach, milk production increased nearly 40%. I suspect that loving rather than poking works with people, too. It may mean a little self-sacrifice of inconvenience, but it is effective and is somewhat the intention of Paul in Romans 12.

Kenya, like much of Africa is relatively poor. When compared with Dubai in the United Arab Emirates it is especially so. We paused there on our return long enough to go to the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. It sits beside the Mall of Dubai, the world’s largest shopping mall and a respite from the 1120 F. heat. The mall has a magnificent aquarium that is nearly four floors high and a large skating rink. Some men dressed in their white robes or dishdashas and keffiyehs drove up to the mall in their Maseratis and Ferraris to have them parked by the valet service. Every major Jewelry store in the world seemed to have a shop in the mall.

I spent several hours, walking non-stop in the mall and only saw a portion of its four floors. At one point I sought out a restroom where a man was dutifully scrubbing sinks and urinals. When he paused near I sink, I went over to him and thinking to use my remaining Dirhams or Emirates currency put about $5.00 into his hand saying simply, “Thank you for cleaning this restroom for me.”

As I was drying my hands with a paper towel he called out in English. “Are you a Christian?”

“Yes, I said. I am a follower of Jesus.”

“Could you tell me about him? I have break in about ½ hour.”

We agreed to meet near a restaurant in one of the mall’s food courts. Fortunately I had my New Testament in my shirt pocket and we read from the gospel of John and from the book of Romans. Long ago I decided that although many Christian pastors believe that the Gospel of John is the place to begin with new Christians, I determined that much of the Gospel of John is primarily about who Jesus was rather than what he did. Who Jesus is was not so much a mystery. But, what Jesus did was what this man wanted to know. So, after reading John 3:16 we quickly turned to the book of Romans, first to Romans 5 and then to Romans 12 to indicate the kind of difference a follower of Jesus is to make in the world.

“Thank you for food,” he said. “Thank you for tip. Thank you most for showing me about following Jesus. Jesus was a great prophet.”

“Yes, I said. Jesus was a great prophet but more important to followers of Jesus was that Jesus was the son of God. Jesus was God in human flesh and we are all to be children of God.”

“Me a child of God?”

“Yes, you.’

I have no idea what will happen, but it was a pretty simple sacrifice, really. But in the great mall of Dubai, two men had a sort of communion at the food court. The words of institution were not said and the napkins were paper, but they felt God’s presence in their hearts.

Minds, molded from within make living sacrifices. Much of the world won’t understand, but that happens when God is worshipped as God has outlined through the pens of New Testament writers.

*ADDITIONAL ILLUSTRATION (Bruce elected not to tell this story so that we might move into communion)*

A number of years ago I attended the New Wilmington Missionary Conference. That year we were blessed to have Roger Nishioka, who was at the time the associate for Youth Ministry of the Presbyterian Church USA addressing youth at the Institute Hour. His arrival in New Wilmington was a bit delayed. While driving from Louisville through Ohio he saw the red light with a little oil can come on in his red Honda. The red light on your dash that tells you that you have no oil is not good news.

Those of you who have driven with this little red light on and have heard the grinding of metal against metal without lubrication and have had to replace your engine know how bad this news is. Driving without oil isn't quite as bad as lighting a match to see how much gasoline is in the tank or having a son who wants to feed the horses who provide the horsepower a few sugar cubes and placing them in the gasoline. It isn't quite as bad but, it is pretty close.

Roger pulled off the interstate and into a service station. Mechanics, Fred and Steve leaned against the station, almost as if to hold it up. They looked something like Bartles and Jaymes patiently waiting for someone to ring that little bell. They took notice when Roger removed himself from the car. It isn't every day that you see a stocky 6'1" Japanese fellow with a full head of hair walking toward you. They were wearing grey trousers and stripped shirts, covered with streaks of grease and their names Steve and Fred above their pockets.

"Hey, I got some car trouble."

"Yep."

"Maybe you can help me."

"Yep."

"My red oil light is on."

"You from around here?"

"No, I'm from Louisville, KY and I'm on my way to New Wilmington, PA. There is a conference there and I'm going to talk to the people there.

"You a preacher?"

"Well, sorta, like a preacher."

"What ya gonna preach about."

"Well, this is a missionary conference and we will be looking at being servants - servants of Christ and what that means. Do you think you could help me out with the car.

"Maybe."

Steve and Fred went over to the car. Fred lifted up the hood while Steve sat behind the steering wheel to evaluate the dashboard. "Do you think there is anything seriously wrong?"

"Maybe."

"Do you think that you can fix it?"

"Maybe."

After poking around all over the engine compartment Fred straightened and held up a wire and said that all knowing word and explanation:

"Electrical."

Somehow he reattached the wires.

"How much?"

"Free"

"No, I’m happy to pay. You've gone to a lot of trouble and its Saturday, and you really didn't have to help me out with this. How much, really.

"Free"

"I know that this isn't free, I'm happy to pay."

"Servant. . .Fred's a Methodist. . .Methodists, servants. . .Methodists serve Presbyterians."

Yes, minds, molded from within make living sacrifices. Much of the world won’t understand, but that happens when God is worshipped as others are served, for that is the sacrifice God seems to want more than bulls or goats.

**Romans 12:1-5, 9-18 - J.B. Phillips New Testament (PHILLIPS)**

**1-2With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.**

**3-8As your spiritual teacher I give this piece of advice to each one of you. Don’t cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance, but try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities by the light of the faith that God has given to you all.** For just as you have many members in one physical body and those members differ in their functions, so we, though many in number, compose one body in Christ and are all members of one another. Through the grace of God we have different gifts. If our gift is preaching, let us preach to the limit of our vision. If it is serving others let us concentrate on our service; if it is teaching let us give all we have to our teaching; and if our gift be the stimulating of the faith of others let us set ourselves to it. Let the man who is called to give, give freely; let the man who wields authority think of his responsibility; and let the man who feels sympathy for his fellows act cheerfully.

**9Let us have no imitation Christian love. Let us have a genuine break with evil and a real devotion to good.**

**10Let us have real warm affection for one another as between brothers, and a willingness to let the other man have the credit.**

**11Let us not allow slackness to spoil our work and let us keep the fires of the spirit burning, as we do our work for God.**

**12Base your happiness on your hope in Christ. When trials come endure them patiently, steadfastly maintain the habit of prayer.**

**13Give freely to fellow-Christians in want, never grudging a meal or a bed to those who need them.**

**14And as for those who try to make your life a misery, bless them. Don’t curse, bless.**

**15Share the happiness of those who are happy, the sorrow of those who are sad.**

**16Live in harmony with each other. Don’t become snobbish but take a real interest in ordinary people. Don’t become set in your own opinions.**

**17Don’t pay back a bad turn by a bad turn, to anyone. Don’t say “it doesn’t matter what people think”, but see that your public behaviour is above criticism.**

**18As far as your responsibility goes, live at peace with everyone.**

19Never take vengeance into your own hands, my dear friends: stand back and let God punish if he will. For it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay’.

20-21... these are God’s words: ‘Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head’. Don’t allow yourself to be overpowered with evil. Take the offensive—overpower evil by good!

**Commentary on Romans 12**

Most commentators see a definite break between chapters 12-15 of Romans and all of what has come before. While there is indeed a shift between Romans 9-11 and 12:1, in many respects, Paul’s letter to the Romans would be incomplete without the practical exhortations of this last section. These chapters concern how to live as a community that bears witness to the power of God’s righteousness.

The end of the letter develops the implications of God’s actions through the cross for those whom God has called. At the beginning of chapter 12, Paul begins with “therefore” — an indicator that the following exhortations relate to all that Paul has previously argued. The apostle has presented the power of God to combat the pervasive rule of sin over the entire cosmos, and he has urged the Romans to live by the power of God’s Spirit. Indeed, it will take the “power of God” for the church to have a transformation of the mind and to be true markers of God’s good, acceptable and perfect will (12:1-2).

Paul’s exhortations in chapter 12, while wholly dependent upon the preceding arguments, are also practically engaged with the real situation of the Roman believers. In chapter 13, Paul will urge the Romans to live quietly in their political environment, obey the leaders so far as it is possible and pay their taxes. Roman rulers were typically suspicious of voluntary groups and associations and tended to intervene anytime an association or religious group was perceived to be a threat to Roman peace. Suetonius records that Claudius expelled the Jews (likely in 49 C.E.) because of constant disturbances at the “instigation of *Chrestus*” (*Lives of the Caesars*, “ Claudius,” 25. *Chrestus* is most likely a construal for *Christos* or Christ. Compare with Acts 18:1-3). The political acceptance of a group of followers meeting to exalt a Jewish Messiah crucified on a Roman cross is a bit tenuous in the heart of the Roman Empire. As long as they do not draw attention to themselves, Paul believes that they will be allowed to keep meeting. It is of no surprise that Paul would want the believers to act peaceably so that they may continue to worship together, since community formation is dear to Paul’s message. In chapter 15, he envisions an eschatological community of Jew and Gentile proclaiming praises to God with one voice.

Therefore, in this last section Paul addresses tensions within the church. In chapter 14, it is clear that some of these tensions revolve around food regulations and the observance of a particular day for worship. Clearly some in the church are passing judgments on others, and Paul urges them to act in love, and he refocuses their attention on the larger picture of God’s kingdom (14:13-23). Paul ultimately exhorts them in 15:2, “Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.”

Yet, before this apostle, who has never visited this church and who has no personal relationship with them, dives into these more specific issues that are dividing their church in chapters 14-15, he must first show the importance of the community. The community for Paul is a living witness to God’s abundant grace and power. He applauds its diversity in 12:3-8 and challenges the Romans to think of themselves as a unified body (12:4). Each member must recognize that the God who called each person is the same God who provided distinctive gifts to each one and who expects each to use the gifts to strengthen the whole and to serve as Christ’s body in their world (12:5). It is with this context in mind that Paul gives a string of imperatives in 12:9-21 that provides tangible instructions for how to be a unified body in the present age.

This section is framed by demonstrating acts of real love even in the midst of evil. The first part, verses 9-13, brings to focus visible markers of love: exhibiting brotherly affection, showing honor to one another, living zealously by the Spirit, living in hope, contributing to the needs of the saints, and practicing hospitality. The second set of verses, however, is much more concerned with showing love in the presence of evil — either as evil manifests itself inside the community through divisions or in the church’s situation in the Roman Empire. In these exhortations, Paul is much more concerned that the church be a witness of God’s love than that the church rectify injustices committed by its enemies. He places justice and vengeance in God’s hands and urges the community to overcome evil by embodying the goodness of God.

In verses 9-13, love is central to Paul’s instructions, but so is hate. There is no room here for gray. Love is associated with all that is good — all that conforms to God’s will (12:2). Yet, Paul also urges the believers to hate. Common hatred can form community, in some cases, more effectively than a common good. To hate what is evil implies a common sense of what “evil” means. For Paul, all that is evil is associated with the power of sin working through the flesh. If the Roman believers live according to the Spirit (v. 11), they will hate what is evil because Sin is completely antithetical to the workings of God. Strife in the community is not a sign of life according to the Spirit, but rather a sign of sin’s power to create disunity in the body of Christ. Paul urges the Romans to recognize this disunity for what it is — a marker of what is evil.

Paul is keenly aware that the church lives in a tension, and the imperatives throughout this passage demonstrate this reality. The believers have the marker of the Spirit and can live by it, but they still reside in a realm that is corrupted by sin’s power and are still proving themselves to be susceptible to that power through their squabbles with one another. Paul urges them, therefore, to rejoice in your “hope” (v. 12). This hope echoes the hope in chapter 8 to be glorified with Christ as fellow heirs and to bear witness along with all of creation to God’s ultimate redemption. In this time of tension, of waiting for the fruition of God’s kingdom, they must be patient in tribulation and constantly rely on God through prayer (v.12).

Because the presence of evil still plagues their lives in this age, Paul gives them concrete advice for living with persecution (v. 14), grief (v. 15), strife (v. 16) and enemies (vv. 17-20). But, the advice is not individual-oriented. Rejoicing and weeping with one another and living in harmony edify the community (vv. 15-16). Living peaceably with all (v. 18) has real implications not only for life inside the community but also for how others perceive the community. If the community actually allows God to be the avenger then it is free to serve any would-be enemies.

Paul’s final exhortation is a mission charge, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” In other words, Paul urges them to be visible markers of God’s goodness and grace in a world that is corrupted by sin.
While the string of imperatives in 12:9-21 might be tempting to skim past, Paul’s exhortations here provide concrete ways for the believers to exhibit themselves as the body of Christ and practically show how the community might avoid strife with one another and live peaceably with all.

1. *Remolded*, August 7, 2011, 1st Presbyterian Church of Pittsford, lectionary, Matthew 14 and other readings of Genesis 2, Mark 10:6-9 and Romans 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)