

Today, as a church, we mark the return of students and teachers to the physical and virtual classrooms of our community. When we read these words in the letter to the Romans today, a phrase like “living sacrifice” takes on a different sort of character, doesn’t it?

I can't remember a time when going to school felt quite so – risky. Risky for those who step into physical classrooms and risk exposure to the coronavirus. Risky for many others who will teach in ways for which no one was sufficiently trained before you just had to do it.

All you educators need to know of my deep, personal appreciation for you, for the burdens you carry on behalf of so many families (including mine) as we all try and muddle through. I applaud your courage, your stamina, your resiliency. Living sacrifices, indeed!

Underneath it all, you are pointing to some of the deep truths of faith, to the aspiration of our faith lives. I want to celebrate that in worship today.

Here, in Romans 12, we want to know what that phrase means for us. What is a living sacrifice? The Apostle Paul gives it in negative and positive descriptions. First, we learn what a living sacrifice *isn't*: it is *not* to be passively conformed to this world. Then we learn what a living sacrifice *is*: a living sacrifice *is* a person transformed by the renewing of his or her core, that place where moral judgments, discernment, decision and commitment reside – our minds.

One of the ongoing themes of the letter to the Romans concerns the texture and contours of that renewed mind. Reading through the letter, we learn that the renewed mind knows that the authentic gospel and living it our means thinking about God and your own your place in God's world in authentic ways.

- Right thinking means that believers know that they are called to be holy. (1:7)
- Right thinking knows that God's eternal power and divine status should be continually affirmed by worshiping God instead of anything in creation. (1:18-25)
- Right thinking knows that all people sin and stand under God's judgment. (3:9-20)
- Right thinking knows that we cannot take credit or boast in our faith. (3:27-28).
- Right thinking reminds us that we form personal character that lives even through hardships with hope. Even the hard things are given meaning through God's love expressed in Christ. (5:3-11)
- Right thinking means viewing our baptism as dying, being buried and rising alongside Christ in order to show that we are bound to righteousness, not to sin. (6:1-18)
- Right thinking reminds us that we don't find it within ourselves to keep God's moral law. (7:7-25) Instead, we know ourselves as recipients of God's Spirit. (Romans 8:1-17) We are saved because of Christ's intervention for us. (Romans 8:31-39)

The words of Romans 12:1-8 come on the heels of worship words, a song of praise, a doxology at the end of Chapter 11. Paul now calls on believers to put those worship words to work in their lives. Hear how Eugene Peterson’s adaptation in *The Message* captures it for us:

*“Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.”*

Paul isn't calling us to self-actualization or a personal growth plan for greater spiritual achievement. What I want us to notice today is that the Apostle has built a theme for 11 chapters about the renewal of our minds that comes to rest by describing that renewal in the context of life with other believers.

We have to be reminded so often that none of us can live a transformed life out in the world unless we are living as full members of the body of Christ. We resist conformity to the world, we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, when we are also contributing to the life and mission of the church.

We contribute according to the measure of faith God has given each one of us, *“in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”* (12:3)

As with some of Paul's other teachings, this is one of those verses that is easily misunderstood to establish some sort of hierarchy. There would be some who suggest that the Word implies here that some have been given a great proportion of faith, while others a more modest amount or of inferior quality. If you hear it that way, I want you to know that that is the world talking.

Do we all have room to mature and grow? Of course. Do you have to wait until you have achieved a certain spiritual status before you begin? Of course not! You have a part to play from Day 1 of your new life in Christ. After all, this whole thought begins: *“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...”*

We might better understand if we imagine ourselves in the kitchen of a master baker. If she's going to bake, she'll need flour. However, she's going to use different kinds and different portions of flour to produce what she intends: cake flour in a certain proportion for pastries, and different type and portion for bread and different again for cookies. You might even need to prepare something special with potato flour for those with gluten allergies!

You get the idea. Different amounts of types of faith will lead people to different roles God intends for them. One person might have the kind of faith that leads her into a career as a missionary, and another may have the sort of faith that leads him to work as a department manager and use his expertise to serve others as God provides opportunities. Each of those life models can be living as a sacrificial offering. But it is in the church that those gifts are identified, cultivated, celebrated and commissioned and sent back out into the world.

God has given us Spiritual gifts as members of the body of Christ. We are to use the particular gift and gifts God has given us to help the body function, not to promote ourselves or show how we as one body part are better than the others who are another body part. When the body of Christ is healthy, when it is vital, with each part working for the good of the whole, its efforts

can be directed more and more out into the world and be transformational – moving the world from deformity to conformity to the very mind of Christ.

Today we celebrate those who have been gifted and accepted the call to teach, to celebrate those who will learn from them. They all have much to tell us about the transformation of mind. But if we take this Word seriously today, we also know they are not alone. We do not send them out to do our work for us. Instead our teachers and our students resume their transformational journey as part of a larger body that prays, encourages, tutors, transports, advocates, encourages, underwrites and sustains them.

Everyone who hears this word today now receives the challenge to live out their faith in ways appropriate to the amount and type of faith that God has gifted to them. Do you want to present your body as a living sacrifice, to be renewed in your mind as the Apostle challenges us today? Then seek to live out your measure of faith. Exercise your gift in a way that best contributes to the church, the very body of Christ! Amen.