

Good and Acceptable and Perfect
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Isaiah 51:1-6

¹ Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the Lord.

Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.

² Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.

³ For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

⁴ Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation;
for a teaching will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.

⁵ I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
my salvation has gone out
and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.

⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be for ever,
and my deliverance will never be ended.

Romans 12:1-8

¹ 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.

³ For 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.

We so often hear the reading from Romans as an affirmation of the different gifts we each have to offer the church and the world, and rightly so. Today, though, I'd like to think about the body in a different way. What might it look like if we read Romans, and Isaiah, as a congregation rather than as individual worshippers?

Paul opens saying, "I appeal to you therefore...by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Do you wonder about that "therefore"? I did. What argument had Paul been making that this is his conclusion? He had been speaking to followers in Rome, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. Each had been coming up with reasons why they were the superior heirs to Christ and Paul spent much of his letter explaining why neither is above the other because all are equal in Christ. And so we arrive here, at Paul's explaining of how to truly behave like heirs to the generous life granted through Jesus' death and resurrection. This guidance is still relevant today and so I invite us to hear the urging to present our bodies as living sacrifices as an urging to this church to be a living sacrifice. As a living sacrifice, we do not deplete ourselves to nothing in the giving but instead give in ways which allow us to continue giving, offer ourselves up to God in ways which allow us to continue offering ourselves up, offer ourselves in ways which are holy and acceptable.

Paul says "Do not be conformed to this world...so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." If we refrain from listening to what the world wants or expects us to be and, instead, listen for what God is calling us to be, then we can discern God's will. Then we can understand what is good and acceptable and perfect in God's sight. Now there are many ways of being which are irrefutably good and acceptable and perfect – being kind to others, working for the good of others, serving others – but I don't think Paul is referring to these irrefutable ways.

Paul emphasizes the different functions and different gifts of each and I suggest that what Paul speaks of as good and acceptable and perfect varies with the gifts and functions of each. What we expect as good, acceptable, and perfect from one body is unrealistic and unfair to expect from another. It makes me think of a quote often attributed to Einstein: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." What is good, acceptable, and perfect for one church is not the same for another.

Knowing Paul was trying to correct the believers in Rome from putting themselves above one another, it makes sense that he would say, "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." There are individuals among us who have highly visible, clearly discernable

gifts. And there are individuals among us whose gifts are subtle, yet equally important. The same goes for churches. I've always felt like one of those more subtle folks – I can't wow you with a talent and I don't think I'll be known for the one big thing I did. In feeling like that, I've wondered if maybe the measure of gifts God gave me was less than the measure given others. Reading Romans again this week gave me a new perspective: the measure is not measuring quantities of gifts but qualities of gifts. Think Mary Poppins and her ruler. As she pulls it out to measure the children, her tape is not marked with numbers. When she measures Michael, the tape displays that he is "Extremely stubborn and suspicious." Jane is "Rather inclined to giggle. Doesn't put things away." And you'll remember that Mary Poppins is "Practically perfect in every way."

Not all members, all churches, have the same measure, the same qualities of gifts; not all churches have the same functions. As Paul says "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." As a congregation, what are our gifts to round out and deepen the body of the presbytery? The PC(USA)? The church universal? I'll admit here is where the particulars of you as an individual come in. We have a long history of local service, especially of feeding others, and that includes giving of our time and of our finances. In many ways, First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha makes a difference here and abroad.

You may remember last week that I challenged you to join me in a spiritual exercise program beginning September 7. I mentioned last week that making time for personal worship, spiritual exercise, and sticking with it, is one of those activities which propels itself forward once you get in the rhythm of doing it. The more you do it, the more you find you are capable of doing. In 2001 I did the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk, which involved walking 56 miles over the course of three days. As I alluded to last week, I would not consider myself an athlete by any stretch of the imagination. But as I trained for that walk, gradually building up to being able to walk 20 miles in a day, I discovered that I was capable of far more than I imagined. Should you join me in this spiritual exercise program, and I hope you will, I am confident you will find yourself capable of far more than you could imagine. What new things might you then bring to this congregation? How might what you bring spur others in ways you can't foresee? You, as an individual, impact what this church's gifts are, the gifts we use for making the body better. And what this congregation brings to the presbytery, the Presbyterian Church, and the church universal has the potential of spurring the unforeseen in each of them. No pressure, as the kids would say.

What is good and acceptable and perfect for this church is what this church is with each of our gifts contributed. Today and now we serve and we feed and we support – those are the graces given to this congregation in this time. Are there other graces yet undiscovered, yet uncovered? I would imagine

yes. And I trust they will be revealed in God's time. Until then, we are called to continue listening, continue being transformed instead of conformed, so that we might discern God's will – what is good and acceptable and perfect. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God, help us discern what is good and acceptable and perfect, we pray. Amen.