9/15-16/18 Rev. Amy Haines

Rm 12:1-8 Connected by Grace Making a Difference Series/Confirmation

This weekend is a celebration. Not because our favorite sports teams won. Not because we finally had a sunny weekend. Not because pumpkin spice everything has already appeared.

No, this weekend is a celebration because ten youth are publicly taking the next step of faith.

Since last November, these ten young men and women have been a part of our 2018 Confirmation Class, learning more about the Christian faith through classes and mentoring sessions, through the Believe conference and youth mission trip, through participation in small groups, worship and service, and through pondering what faith in Jesus means to them. Now it is time to celebrate as they claim their faith in Jesus and commit to membership in our local congregation.

Yet, as I have told them already, this celebration is not a graduation. Rather it is the end of one chapter, the journey of confirmation, and the beginning of a new chapter, the journey of faith yet to come. What faith commitments will they continue to live out? Where is God calling them next to serve? How can they still be there for one another within the body of Christ and the community of faith we locally call First UMC of Springboro? The next chapter begins when they leave worship this weekend.

As we support them in this milestone, we are reminded to ponder our own faith journeys. What chapter are we on in the story of our faith? Where have we experienced the grace of God? How have we responded to such grace? How do we live together as the body of Christ, the church in this world? Where is God calling us next to serve?

This weekend also marks the halfway point of our September sermon series called Making a Difference, pondering God’s call to follow Jesus in practical ways of love and service. So far we have pondered the call to serve others in Jesus’ name. In the next two weeks we will get practical with how to figure out ways to serve. Today is the hinge between the why and the how.

Today, the Apostle Paul encourages us to live in response to what we believe.

In the first 11 chapters of the letter to the Romans Paul has been describing basic beliefs of the Christian faith. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We are only justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Grace is not a license to sin. Salvation is for everyone who hears God’s truth and believes.

Then, in Chapter 12, Paul changes from belief to practice, shifting from what we believe

to how that belief influences our daily lives.

Listen to how the Message describes this daily offering of our lives:

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

(Rm 12.1-2 MSG)

Recall that Moses said, “Love the Lord your God, with ALL your heart, and ALL mind, and ALL your soul.” Jesus called this the first commandment, then commanded us to also follow the second commandment, to love others as we love ourselves.

Paul echoes Moses and Jesus by encouraging followers of Jesus to present our everyday and ordinary lives, everything we have and everything we are, as a living sacrifice, as a life offering,

in thanksgiving for God’s love and grace offered to us through God’s Son Jesus.

Paul says to us today

Give your mind to God, and everything you think.

Give your eyes and all that you see.

Give your ears and all that you hear.

Give your mouth and all that you say.

Give your face and all the love you express through the expressions on your face. Give your heart and all that you feel.

Give your hands and all that you touch.

Give your feet and every place you go.

Give your give your total self to God.

-Edward Markquart “Offerings to God” sermonsfromseattle.com adapted

The Confirmands were sometimes challenged when I expected them to worship twice a month,

participate in small groups three times a month, and read the entire Gospel of John in one month.

Yet here Paul is challenging all of us to give our entire lives to God. To offer everything we do, everything we say, everything we have, everything we do to God. How hard is it to give our all!

I confess, there are times when I read this chapter and find myself squirming, wondering how much of my life I do not present as an offering to the Lord.

Have you ever said:

Lord here is my time, but only during these hours can I serve you.

Lord here is my money, but only for these specific projects.

Lord here is my effort, but only for these select ministries.

Lord here is my life, but only in these areas will I allow you to meddle.

Because we are scared, selfish, sinful human beings, we want to pick and choose the parts of our lives that we offer to the Lord. We want to sing “I Surrender All” yet mean I surrender some.

But God doesn’t want just part of us; God wants all of us.

God wants our faith and our fears, our passions and our doubts, our time and our skills, our love and our sorrow; God wants both the money we are willing to give and the money we don’t want to spend, God wants both the praise we shout in good times and the praise we struggle to whisper in hard times, God wants both Sundays and Saturdays and every day in between, to be the Lord of our lives every moment of every day.

How hard is it to give our all as an offering to God, when the pull of the world is so strong to conform? Consider the myriad of marketing images you view each and every day. From billboards to commercials, from flyers to email, on credit card receipts and website pop ups,

we are bombarded by a culture that expects us to conform, to stay within expected boundaries of tradition, to want more stuff in order to keep up with our neighbors, to be like everyone else.

This is a world that wants us to look the other way at injustice and oppression, to give in to jealousy and greed, to play the competition game in such a way that belittles others while lifting up ourselves. This is a world that wants to keep us so busy that intentional time for God and God’s people becomes low on our list of priorities.

Paul implores us not to conform, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. When our minds are focused on God, we will begin to make room for Jesus in our hearts and our minds,

our calendars and our checkbooks. We will begin to think through our choices and our priorities

in light of Jesus’ call and commands. When we allow God to transform us, moment by moment, day by day, then we will grow in faith and maturity. And as we grow deeper as disciples of Jesus, we will be evermore on the lookout for ways to love and serve others in Jesus’ name.

..I once heard a story about a little boy who went into a church one Sunday morning to get out of the cold. He had been trying to sell newspapers, but not a single customer had passed by. He entered the church, hoping to pass an hour unnoticed on the back row. The preacher delivered a powerful sermon about Jesus and his love for us. At the end of the service, they took an offering.  
The ushers went from row to row until, finally, one came near to the little newspaper boy. He stopped right in front of the little boy and held out the offering plate. The boy stared at the offering plate, and after a long pause, he asked the usher to place the offering plate on the floor. Then the little boy did something very unusual. He stepped into the offering plate -- first one foot and then the other.

He slowly looked up with tears streaming down his cheeks and said, “Mister, I don’t have any money; I haven’t sold a single newspaper today, but if Jesus did all that preacher said he did just for me, I will gladly give my life to Him.” -sermons4kids.com

The idea of an offering or sacrifice is found in our Jewish history.

..There were three main types or groups of sacrifices in ancient Israel’s worship: those that made atonement; those that were for celebration; and those that were for dedication.

These offerings were our ancestors’ way of responding to God’s grace in a tangible expression of worship.

-John Guns 2-10-08 theafricanamericanlectionary.org

Yet now that Jesus has paid the price for our sins, our response to God’s grace is to give our entire lives as an offering, to surrender our entire lives in humble service, following God’s will and ways. We do not live for God to earn God’s grace. We live by faith in God as a response to God’s grace. This is true on Monday and Friday as much as it is true on Sunday.

Last week Jenn Fry said the reason we are called to do what we do is in response to God’s incredible love in our lives. This is love that sent Jesus to earth to live and die and live again

to show us the ways of God. This is love that reaches out to us, even when we don’t deserve it,

and calls us to follow. This is love that is pure grace, the undeserved gift of our salvation. We are called to offer ourselves to God in response to such amazing grace.

And when we do so, we remember that we are in this together. Old Testament sacrifices were often offered at the Temple as a public way to atone or to celebrate. When we offer our lives as an offering to God, when we say yes to following Jesus, we also say yes to being a part of God’s people in this world, the universal church, the local community of faith, the body of Christ.

Like it or not, we are in this together. Christianity is not a solitary religion, but a communal faith. We may not always get along with one another in the body of Christ, but we are connected together within the body of Christ. So if we are connected, we need to work together. And if we are to work together, we must build up one another in love.

Rev. Alyce McKenzie rejoices that Paul used the image of the body for followers of Jesus. She said, “Whatever made him think of it, the body is the perfect metaphor for ecclesial unity!

It's better than family or team. You can take a break from being a member of a team. You can go on vacation without your family. But you can't take a break from the parts of your body.”

- Alyce McKenzie, “Many Members, One Body” 8-18-14 patheos.com

Our confirmands did not complete the journey of the past year alone. They were there for one another, learning from and encouraging one another, and even giggling together along the way.

Their parents were there for them, transporting them, striving to make church a priority on their schedules, offering encouragement, engaging in faith conversation. Each confirmand also had a mentor, another member of our congregation with whom to connect and learn with and learn from.

Paul reminds us that as we share common core beliefs as followers of Jesus we are also connected together in the body of Christ. We are connected first and foremost by the grace of God offered to all of us. This grace is evident in God’s claiming of us through the waters of baptism, at whatever age we are baptized. We are connected by our willingness to follow Jesus.

Like the early disciples we will not always get it right, we may not always understand God’s ways, we may not always do what Jesus calls us to do, yet Jesus still calls us to follow. And we are connected by our places in the body of Christ. We won’t all have the same gifts or skills. We won’t all have the same passions and availability. Yet we all have the same call to love and serve in the name of Jesus.

Remember Paul’s final words in our passage today:

“In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we’re talking about is Christ’s body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn’t amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let’s just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren’t.”

“We have different gifts that are consistent with God’s grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging. The one giving should do it with no strings attached. The leader should lead with passion. The one showing mercy should be cheerful.” (Rm 12:4-8 MSG)

We are called to support one another on this journey of faith, connected by grace. As confirmands, as parents, as the church.

Confirmands, continue to support one another. Parents, continue to support your youth

in their faith journeys and grow in yours. Church, continue to support one another of all ages

as we learn and grow and serve together.

Consider how we are connected like the members of a football team.

..On a football team, team members will prepare for game day in very different ways depending on the position they play. The quarterbacks practice passing, the receivers practice receiving,

the kickers practice kicking, the linemen practice blocking. But ALL have gotten their instructions from the same coaching staff which is perfectly happy to have them practicing different skills with an eye to performing different functions in the game. Still, there is an essential unity among them: the same game plan, the same playbook and, to be sure, the same head coach.

-- David Leininger 1-25-04 The Body of Christ adapted

Romans, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians—they all remind us that as Christians we are like football players, part of something greater than ourselves, part of the body of Christ, the church in this world, called to follow the same coach for the same goal, called to follow Jesus in loving service to our neighbors local and around the world.

We celebrate this weekend with our newest brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet may we all take seriously the call to serve as Christ’s representatives in the world, lived out through our prayers, presence gifts, service and witness, to the glory of God through our Lord and Savior Jesus. May we all go forth to write the next chapter of our faith journeys, loving and serving in the ways God calls us.

May it be so. Let us pray.