

Homily, St. Andrew's, 10:30am
Proper 21A, Sunday, August 24, 2014
Romans 12:1-8

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

I have had the joy and privilege of learning from a number of children over the course of many years of teaching dance. Among my favourites were the classes of preschoolers up to about age 6. Once children grow past about 5 or 6 years old, they really start to learn how to behave 'properly' in the world and abide by the rules that govern our society. I'm not talking about official laws but the societal rules that aren't written down but are just as strictly enforced. For instance, a good friend of mine was horrified when she overheard her 4 year old inform some visiting neighbourhood buddies: "I am the prettiest!" My friend later tried to explain to her confident little girl that such statements aren't polite or appropriate.

As I heard the story, I was a little dismayed. It reminded me of an earlier experience with some little girls, 5 and 6 year olds I think, in a dance class. We were approaching recital time and that in that particular class, we got to try on their costumes for the first time. They were brightly coloured little bodysuits and matching tutus lined with sequins... beautiful and perfect. I always closed the curtains to the mirrors during class, because the wall of mirrors tended to be too distracting for the small dancers but on this day, I knew they would want to see themselves dressed up. We got the costumes on and when I opened the curtains, several little girls ran... RAN... right up to the mirror to inspect themselves. Several declared themselves just "so beautiful" and begged to go out of the room to show their mommy or daddy how beautiful they were. I remember standing there watching these lovely pint size dancers primp in front of the mirror, with their noses almost touching it, and feeling dismayed. When did we lose that? I was acutely aware that had that been an adult class, the adult women would surely not have run to the mirror to primp and declare themselves "so beautiful." The little girls had it wrong, of course, so say the rules of proper society, and yet there was something so pure, so joyful and so ... right... about their love for their bodies and their ability to see their beauty. When did we lose that?

As a rule, we have a hard time loving and honouring our bodies - our real bodies rather than some crazy, impossible ideal - in our culture and in our churches. And yet God has no such issues. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters," Paul writes to us today, "by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship." God created the fullness of who we are - our bodies, minds and spirits - and God wants us bring all of who we are to our relationship with God, including our worship experience.

This passage we have from Romans chapter 12 is a major turning point in Paul's letter with the first 2 sentences offering a summary of what he has written in the previous 11 chapters, the natural conclusion of his argument to date. It is a transition from more abstract theological argument to practical, ethical imperatives on how Christians should live according to the theological argument that has gone before. The ground of his argument is "the mercies of God". This is Paul's way of summing up "the depth of God's riches and wisdom and knowledge," (NIB, 703) and focusing on the gift of what God has done in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When Paul then implores us to present our bodies as living sacrifice, it comes as something of a surprise, because we have often heard the physical and spiritual as opposing categories. But Paul is clever. Paul does use the term 'flesh' as an opposite to spirit, but the term

'body' is different. As one writer describes, "... the point of 'body' is not that it refers to one part only of the human totality, but that it refers to the complete person seen from one point of view: the point of view in which the human being lives as a physical object within space and time. This whole self is to be 'presented' - to God..." (NIB, 704) And so while Paul doesn't single out only our bodies - our skin and bones - he still breaks with much of the belief of his, and our time, because he doesn't allow a denial of our physical being. How often have you heard from yourself or others, spirituality described in terms that deny our physical lives? The Gnostic temptation to view our bodies as mere containers for our souls, not valuable in their own right, is still prevalent today. It is a great temptation to believe our thoughts are more holy than our actions and that our minds can overcome or overpower what our bodies have to say.

And yet our bodies don't lie. Our bodies tell us when we're stressed out, when we have unresolved grief or other issues, or when we are overcome with positive or negative emotion. We burst out with spontaneous dance and laughter. We get sick. We lose or gain weight. We over or under sleep. I wonder if part of the reason we seek to teach and control young children is because they are so embodied that it makes us uncomfortable. They scream when their hurt; they cry when they want something or feel scared; they run to a mirror to see how beautiful they are. They just do whatever their instinct directs and it makes us both uncomfortable and envious, I think, because it is not what we think, but our laughter and our tears that tell the real story of our lives.

Over the course of teaching many dance workshops and classes, I have had the great privilege of seeing many people's souls shine through their movement and I have come to believe that it is our movement that is truly the window to our soul. Modern dancer Doris Humphrey described it best when she said: "Nothing so clearly and inevitably reveals the inner [person] than movement and gesture. It is quite possible, if one chooses, to conceal and dissimulate behind words or paintings or statues or other forms of human expression, but the moment you move you stand revealed, for good or ill, for what you are."

Our bodies don't lie. It is our movement, our gestures, our actions, our physical beings that reveal who we really are. God wants us to bring our bodies to worship as living sacrifice because no matter what issues we may have with our bodies - no matter what you may think of your body - it's old and tired and can't do what it used to; you have a fat belly or skinny chicken legs; you're too tall or too short... whatever you may think of your body - God thinks it's holy and acceptable. God thinks the fullness of who you are - heart, mind, soul and body - is holy and acceptable.

The second sentence in this transitional passage seems a little more familiar and comfortable after this body-talk: "Do 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." Notice the order, because I think it's important... bringing our bodies - our whole selves - to worship, and then having our minds transformed. Our bodies lead; our minds follow. It seems somehow more familiar to focus on what we think, what we know and what we believe as the key to our salvation and our life in Christ. But Paul keeps body and mind together as an integrated whole. This may seem radical to many of his Gentile readers, but it is something the Jewish people have always known. Their key confession of faith is called the Shema and says: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." It is a commandment repeated by Jesus and repeated by us Anglicans often, particularly when we worship with the Book of Common Prayer. And it is a

commandment that asks us to bring our whole selves into relationship with God. Bringing both our bodies and our minds to our relationship with God, our worship and our Christian living means that “neither insincere following of an outward code, nor the easy immorality of keeping the mind (supposedly) pure while the body can do what it likes, will suffice in the new age that began with Jesus’ resurrection.” (NIB, 707)

As we continue worship today, I encourage you to pay attention to your body and your actions. Are you calm, peaceful, well rested? Are you tired, sick restless? Notice how it feels to stand or sit or kneel. One of the gifts of our Anglican tradition is the amount of movement and gesture involved in our worship. We move to receive communion and reach out our hands; we greet others at the peace; we might make the sign of the cross. Today, instead of letting our movement be rote, I will invite you to DO something different - particularly when we come to the Eucharist - to see how a change in our bodies could effect a transformation of our minds and maybe open us in a new way to God’s will for our lives.

Our bodies are holy and acceptable to God and when we bring them to worship along with the fullness of our hearts, minds and spirits, we can know the transformation that leads us deeper into life with God. May we know such transformation this morning and may it lead us to the knowledge of God’s will for our lives.

[pause]

Before we offer the prayers of the people, I invite you to turn to page 53 in the BAS so we can offer the ancient Hebrew confession of faith. When it does come time for the prayers of the people, I encourage you to take a posture for prayer that is unfamiliar or less familiar to you - stand, sit or kneel; lift your eyes; raise your arms or open your hands... even change it along the way...

Let us pray...