

Therefore...Be Transformed
by Rev. Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
Romans 12.1-8 (Aug. 24, 2008)
Sunshine Cathedral

In 1941, the year before my father was born, that great saint, Judy Garland, a high ranking figure in my personal pantheon sang a beautiful, but sad song in a film called *Ziegfeld Girl*. St. Judy sang, "I'm always chasing rainbows, watching clouds drifting by. My schemes are just like all my dreams, ending in the sky. Some people look and find the sunshine, I always look and find the rain. Some people make a winning sometimes, I never even make a gain, believe me I'm always chasing rainbows, hoping to find a little blue bird in vain."

We do that, don't we? We make a beautiful song out of our sadness, our pain, our fear, our regrets. We so identify with our despair and our low self-esteem that those unhappy attitudes become part of who we think we are. We may even decide that's what God wants for us. It feels safer to give in to the despair, to make a song of it, than it does to change how we think about our divine potential and sacred value.

You know, my favorite image for God is found in the book of Ezekiel. In the first chapter of that prophetic book, we see a rainbow vision of divine Love. The text says, "Like the bow which appears in the clouds on a rainy day was the splendor that surrounded the holy One. Such was the vision of the likeness of the glory of God" (Ez. 1.28). We don't have to simply chase rainbows; we can catch a vision of the divine glory and embrace it and embody and live in its power. At least, that's what our scriptures suggest today.

We heard two powerful readings this morning, but to do justice to either reading, I'm only going to focus on one. I wanted to say some things about the gospel reading, but I know it will come back around soon enough, so for today I want to explore what St. Paul has to teach us.

The Apostle Paul begins today by saying, "I urge you, *therefore*, brothers and sisters..." I urge you, THEREFORE...

Therefore lets us know that Paul is continuing a thought, a message. What has he been trying to say in the preceding chapters? Well, he's trying to say it still, trying to make it clearer so that we will not miss the progressive, positive, practical message he has been offering.

Paul has made his case over and over, and THEREFORE he now urges his audience, "by the mercies of God," to offer their physical lives as a living sacrifice. What does he mean by "sacrifice?" I bet he isn't calling his audience to sacrifice their dignity, or their hope, or their joy. Because this is a continuation of a message that has been 11 chapters in the making, a message that has boldly declared that he is not ashamed of sharing "Good News" (Romans 1.16), a message that has insisted that "God shows no partiality" (2.11), a message that has promised that "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (5.5), a message that has exclaimed, "the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (8.16).

Paul has told us that "the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness..."(8.26), and that "all things work for good for those who love God" (8.28).

Paul challenges and comforts us, saying, "I am convinced that [nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God" (8.38).

He tells us that righteousness isn't a matter of observing rules and restrictions, but that it comes from faith. And let us remember that "faith" is not belief. Belief is an opinion, whereas faith is "trust."

We are made righteous not by the religious rituals we observe and not by the opinions we hold or by what we claim to believe, but by letting ourselves trust that God is good and that God wants only Good for us. Paul says, "The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have achieved it, that is, righteousness that comes from faith" (9.30).

St. Paul says, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the word of *faith* that we preach)..." (10.8).

Trusting that God is good and that we are made in that good and divine image and filled with the spirit of that infinite goodness is what faith is, and faith is what makes us righteous.

What do you believe about Communion? That's your business! What are the details of your commitment with your life-partner? That's your business! What do you believe about the after-life? That's your business! What name do you prefer to call "God"? That's your business! None of that will make us righteous. What makes us righteous, what makes for "right-use" of spirituality, is to trust in divine Goodness expressing in, through, and as us.

Paul adds, "From God and through God and for God are ALL things; to God be glory forever" (11.36). "I urge you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your physical lives as a living sacrifice" (12.1).

So, the message is a positive, optimistic, and joyous one, and that lets us know that his idea of sacrifice is probably positive and optimistic as well.

We often think of sacrifice as doing something unpleasant, or giving up something dear. We may even think of animal sacrifices where animals were ritualistically slain; but what we may not realize or what we may forget is what happened to the slain animal.

The animal wasn't killed in a long, drawn out, torturous way. The point of the sacrifice wasn't to make the animal suffer. The animal was only killed as a gift to a god, but how was that gift shared? In a meal! Priests would eat the animal, and they would share it with the community. The slain goat or lamb was basically a community barbecue...the priest gave the animal to his god; the god gave the animal back to the priest as meat, and the priest shared the meat with the people as a symbolic way of feasting with the god. The Ancient Hebrews did it. The Ephesian cult of Artemis did it. Japanese Zen Buddhists have a ritual where they share tea. We use bread and grape, don't we? Offering a gift in prayer, receiving it back and sharing it to enact communion with one another and with the divine...it's an ancient and beloved practice.

The sacrifice of an animal was part of a party; it was joyous, sumptuous, and abundant. It wasn't to torture an animal or to satisfy the blood lust of an angry deity; the slaughter was just the way of getting meat which was then joyously shared as a reminder of divine grace. When Paul's community hears about a sacrifice, they don't cringe; their mouths start watering!

By the mercies of God...by the goodness of God, in the power of the love of God, offer yourselves as a living sacrifice. We kill the goat to share a community meal; but you can be a living sacrifice, an offering of life and hope and joy to your community. And how do you do that? By trusting that God's goodness is present in your life as special gifts, and then by sharing those gifts with others. We shared the goat. We share the tea. We share the bread. Let's share ourselves, and that requires learning to believe that we have something to offer; we are gifts worth sharing!

"Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them" (12.6).

You see, the world has a habit of focusing on misery, gloom, doom, the sky is falling. The world has a habit of trying to scare the hope out of you, of trying to rob of you the happiness that God wants for you. The world wants you to forget that you are part of the creation God calls "very good" (Genesis 1.31). The world wants you to live in fear, rather than celebrating your sacred

value and living in the power of hope. But Paul says, "Do not conform yourself to the ways of the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind..." (Romans 12.2).

We can learn to think differently. We can learn to focus on the Good. We can learn to trust God's goodness, to depend on it, to expect it, to manifest it in our lives. We can learn to believe in ourselves, and to live in the power of joy that circumstances cannot take away. We can learn that by the mercies of God we are living gifts to our world.

Paul had experienced Resurrection Power...he had fallen and he had been raised back up. He had been stoned, imprisoned, in the end, beheaded...but he didn't let any of that keep him from his mission of sharing himself and his gifts with others, because he had experienced Resurrection Power.

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30.5)... That's Resurrection Power! Paul lived in that power, and he encouraged others to transform their lives by renewing their minds. He wanted people to embrace indomitable hope. He wanted people to embrace happiness...happiness that the world could neither give nor take away. He wanted people to believe in themselves and to trust in the unconditional and all-inclusive of God. He wanted us to have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2.16), a mind so powerfully positive that renewal and transformation were constant realities, a mind that is aware of Resurrection Power. Paul is offering a *Progressive, Positive, and Practical Way of Conscious Living*.

Will you believe in your giftedness today? Will you commit to sharing your gifts to make this world a brighter, more hopeful and joyous place? Will you trust that God is good and wants only Good for you? Will you challenge the fear and misery and despair of your own thoughts and allow yourself to be transformed by the renewing of your minds? Will you take on the mind of Christ and live in Resurrection Power? I hope you will. I know you can. We can. This is the good news. Amen.

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I have the mind of Christ.
I live in Resurrection power.
I embrace hope, happiness, and healing now.
I am abundantly blessed.
I am transformed by the renewal of my mind.
And so it is!

"Arise from dreams of littleness to the realization of the vastness within you." – Paramahansa Yogananda