

“Working Together” Romans 12:1-8 8/26/12

Like many of us, I enjoyed watching some of the London Olympics recently. It was great to watch such a wide variety of sports and hear the compelling stories of so many wonderful athletes. It was also interesting to see the tremendous teamwork required in sports like volleyball, doubles tennis, soccer, and synchronized diving and swimming. It was clear that these athletes knew each other very well, their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and that they worked together to maximize their overall performance as a team. Then there are the so-called individual sports. But as I thought about it, I realized that in those sports, there is a team at work! There are coaches and sponsors. Someone has to pay for equipment and room and board and travel! There are families who have sacrificed, often for a decade or more, and friends who have provided support. There is the US Olympic Committee, and of course, the International Olympic Committee. All of these athletes are supported by some kind of team that makes it possible for them to do what they do.

As we think about life in the church, or life in Jesus Christ, we often think about our individual journeys with the Lord. But there is also a team aspect of Christian faith, which Paul talks about in our Scripture lesson this morning which is found in Romans 12. (SLIDE #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.* <sup>2</sup>*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.* <sup>3</sup>*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.* <sup>4</sup>*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,* <sup>5</sup>*so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.* <sup>6</sup>*We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;* <sup>7</sup>*ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;* <sup>8</sup>*the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*  
(Romans 12:1-8)

Paul begins his call to Christian teamwork by using an image from ancient worship. (SLIDE #2)

*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.* (Rom. 12:1)

The image is an ancient altar on which the priest slaughtered and burned animals as sacrifices to God. But Paul is calling for a different kind of sacrifice here. We are no longer to offer dead animals to God. Instead, we are to offer our selves- our bodies- as living sacrifices, which Paul says is

our spiritual worship, in contrast to the physical sacrifices of old. You see, worship is not just a Sunday morning thing. Worship, according to Paul, is the daily, hourly offering of ourselves to God's service. On Sunday morning we are reminded of who God is and who we are and what God requires of us. And then we re-affirm our commitment to live in the light of those truths, to live as living sacrifices for God's service and use. Then we live out that commitment each day.

Then Paul goes on to talk about what sacrifice and service to God looks like. And it doesn't look like one of those individual sports! It's a team activity. (SLIDE #3) <sup>3</sup>*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.* (Rom. 12:3) He begins by talking about the attitude we bring to our lives, an attitude of humility. (arrogance illustr?) Just as athletes need to realistically assess their strengths and weaknesses to maximize the performance of the team, so we need to have a realistic assessment of ourselves. In this case, Paul cautions us from thinking too highly of ourselves, because, after all, the abilities we have are not of our own doing! They are generous and gracious gifts from God. So there is no rational basis for pride or conceit. (ex. Of a gift?)

He continues. (SLIDE #4) <sup>4</sup>*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,* <sup>5</sup>*so we, who*

*are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.* (Rom. 12:4) Here, Paul uses his favorite image for the church—that of a human body. First, he points out that just like a human body has many parts which are very different from each other, so does the church. In fact, there was a great deal of diversity in the early church at Rome. There were rich and poor, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, as well as many nationalities and cultures. In addition, God had given different members of that church a wide variety of gifts and abilities.

And, like a human body, although the parts are different, all are needed and all are connected to one another. I don't really understand how my pancreas works. I just trust that it will do whatever it is supposed to do. But I know if it stops working, I'm in trouble! In the same way, all the parts in the church are necessary if the body is to be healthy and able to fulfill its mission. In the same way, most of you don't come to church thinking about the work of the Property Committee. It's mostly behind-the-scenes kind of work. But if the air conditioning fails one Sunday morning, or if the walks don't get shoveled when it snows, or if the roof falls in, we all become aware just how important their work is!

Paul then gives us some examples of the kinds of gifts that God gives in the church. (SLIDE #5) <sup>6</sup>*We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;* <sup>7</sup>*ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;* <sup>8</sup>*the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity;*

*the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.* (Rom. 12:6-8)

Keep in mind that this list is just illustrative of the kinds of gifts that God gives us. Paul gives different lists in I Cor. 12 and Ephesians 4. Here, he lists “prophecy,” not usually a gift used in the New Testament to tell the future, but the gift of being able to speak God’s truth to God’s people. The gift translated “ministry” here is the Greek work “diakonos” from which we get our word “deacon.” This is a word which refers to serving others. Teaching is simply teaching God’s truth to others. Exhorting has to do with encouraging those who know the truth to do it! And this gift is very important.

A number of years ago I was hiking with my family in Arches National Park to Delicate Arch, a wonderful feature in the park. Unfortunately, there was no discernable trail over the hot, solid rock, and all of it went uphill. We were getting discouraged at times, not knowing how much further it was, or even if we were going the right way. But hikers returning from the arch encouraged us. “You’re going the right way,” they said. “You’re almost there.” “Just about five more minutes.” “It’s worth the hike.” Their encouragement helped us to keep going when we were tempted to turn around and head back. Those with gifts of encouragement help the rest of us to keep going and keep using the gifts God has given us. We thank you!

Paul notes that some people have special abilities to financially support God's work. He encourages them to do so with generosity. Leadership is a special gift of God's Spirit, too. Some people may think that leading and managing and administrating are too mundane or secular to be spiritual gifts, but the church needs people with these gifts if it is to function well, so God gives these gifts to some people. In the Presbyterian Church, we count on our elders to exercise these gifts. Finally, he notes that the Spirit give special gifts of compassion to some people. I think of folks who work regularly with homeless people or mentally ill people or those who are dying or mentally handicapped people. They need to have hearts of compassion to deal with the challenges that such ministry demands. And Paul wants those with this gift to exercise it with cheerfulness, too!

Those of you who have been on mission trips have seen this passage in action. You need people who can drive, cook, plan, teach, do the skilled construction or medical help or whatever, people to encourage, people to support the trip financially and with prayer. All the parts of Christ's body are necessary if the mission is to be accomplished!

Tea set, best dishes, etc.