

Sermon for The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 18, 2020

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Isaiah 51:1-6

Epistle Reading: Romans 11:33-12:8

Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

Sermon Text: Romans 11:33-12:8

Sermon Title: We are Transformed for Service

Introit: ###

Hymns:

LSB 645 – Built on the Rock the Church Shall Stand

LSB 730 – What is this World to Me

LSB 818 – In Thee is Gladness

LSB 912 – Christ is our Cornerstone

Liturgy:

Divine Service III, p. 184



Songs:

Here I am to Worship

Hear Our Praises

Holy is the Lord

Open the eyes of my heart

Forgive our Sins as We Forgive

A Shield about Me

Liturgy:

Creative Worship



Pastor James Groleau
St. John's Lutheran Church
1200 13th Avenue NW
Austin, MN 55912
Office: (507) 433-2642
Shepherd@JamesPlace.net
StJohnsAustinLCMS.org
Phone Streaming at: 518-906-1379
KAUS 1480 AM Sun. 9:00am



Text: Romans 11:33—12:8

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

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Grace to you, and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The poet Elizabeth Browning once wrote:

Earth is crammed with heaven
and every common bush afire with God,
but only He who sees, takes off his shoes.¹

Our readings this morning invite us to be among those who see. They invite us to see the earth crammed with heaven, to see how God in Christ has come down from heaven and touched the earth to fill it with His glory.

In the Old Testament we have a vision from Isaiah. Isaiah writes to a future people, suffering in exile away from Jerusalem, and he reveals for them a world crammed full of heaven. "Look," he cries, and reveals the wonder of God. One family, Abraham and Sarah, touched by God's grace become a blessing for all nations of the world. One sees the glory spread as God multiplies descendants for Abraham, extending His blessing from one family to all nations. Isaiah promises that the wasteland of Jerusalem, the city that is devastated, will experience rebirth and bloom like the Garden of Eden. Songs of sorrow will become shouts of joy. God's salvation will be proclaimed and, though heaven and earth pass away, God's righteousness will remain. His salvation will endure forever.

In the Holy Gospel, we find Caesarea Philippi crammed full of heaven. Jesus has drawn His disciples far above the Sea of Galilee. The place was ancient. It had been a site for worshiping Baal among the Canaanites, and then Pan among the Greeks, and then Caesar among the Romans. As cultures changed so did the worship. Here is where Peter confesses heaven touching earth in the unchanging work of God, now seen in Jesus. This is not an ancient pagan religion. Peter does not worship a false god like Baal or Pan, or a god of politics like Caesar. Peter worships God, the creator of heaven and earth, who promises to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, and has now come to live and walk among His people. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.

What Isaiah prophesies in the Old Testament reading, what Peter confesses in the Gospel reading is what the apostle Paul celebrates as he writes to the Christians in Rome. Paul has seen earth crammed with heaven, and in these few verses he shares with us a life transforming a vision.

I. Text: Paul reveals God's greater plan for his people at service in the world.

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "Aurora Leigh" in *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: University Press, 1920), 499.

Consider Paul's vision. You know how sometimes when you look at the sun and then look away, your vision is touched by an afterimage of the light? This is what happens to the apostle Paul. He has seen a brilliant vision. The glorious work of God, extending to all nations. Then, when Paul turns to look at the people of Rome, he sees them in a different light.

Listen to the wonder of Paul. Paul is in awe of God's greater story of salvation, fulfilled in the world. Paul writes:

O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of
God. How unsearchable are His judgments and
inscrutable His ways!²

Paul has seen a vision of the end. The restoration of all peoples in the Church. The New Israel of God. That vision is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy from our Old Testament reading. Isaiah prophesied of a time of "joy and gladness" of "thanksgiving and song." Isaiah promises that when "the ransomed of the Lord will return and come to Zion... everlasting joy will be on their heads" and "sorrow and sighing shall flee."³

This is what happens for the apostle Paul. Paul sees the day of restoration, when God brings about a gathering of nations, all nations, Jew and Gentile, into the Church, and Paul's sorrow turns into singing, his sighing into praise. It is as if Paul has seen the light of a beautiful sunset, a glorious ending to a long and difficult day.

Then Paul turns his eyes to the Church in Rome. Now, the Roman Christians would not have appeared glorious to the world around them. Not many of them were rich. Not many of them were powerful. They gathered together in small house churches, their lives a far cry from the glories of Rome much less the glories of heaven. Yet, as Paul looks at these people, he sees earth crammed with heaven, and he them and us to join him in celebrating the wonder of God.

Paul writes:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of
God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and
acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.⁴

Notice how Paul uses the language of sacrifice. The sacrificial worship of God's people is suddenly transformed. God's people become sacrifices, outside the

2 Romans 11:33

3 Isaiah 51:11

4 Romans 12:1

Temple, outside Jerusalem, hidden inside the small gatherings in the heart of the large empire of Rome. These people are God's people, transformed into sacrifices, living, holy, and acceptable to God. Paul knew that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ put an end to Temple sacrifices. Jesus' death was the perfect sacrifice. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By His sacrifice, God's people were freed from offering sacrifices for sins. By His sacrifice, they were freed to become sacrifices. Living sacrifices of praise. As they poured out their lives in service in the world.

As Paul looks at the people in Rome, he sees an afterimage of God's glory. They are the body of Christ, at work in the world. Paul begins to see gifts of the Spirit poured out on the people: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leadership, and mercy. Not only does God freely forgive all sins but He also freely gives all gifts, so that people have a purpose and a place in God's greater story. God has a greater plan for each person in His story of salvation. This is the vision Paul sees. It stirs his heart with wonder. It opens his mouth with praise. Earth is crammed with heaven, as God gathers His people and transforms them for spiritual service in the world.

II. Application: God transforms our humble lives for glorious service.

"Earth's crammed with heaven," Elizabeth Browning once said. "But only he who sees, takes off his shoes." That's the trouble with God's people. Often they don't see the vision of God at work in their lives, in the world.

For the apostle Paul, there was some concern that the Roman Christians would take pride in their status and gifts for service. Paul warns them:

By the grace given to me I say to everyone not to think of himself more highly than he ought.⁵

God's people, today, however, often have the opposite problem. Ask a fellow Christian how God works among His people. They will often point to the service of others rather than confess God's work through their lives. Often we will point to moments set apart for worship, rather than confess God's work in daily life.

For example, some will point to the pastor of the congregation. He is God's servant, the one the Holy Spirit has called through God's people to serve among them. That's true, but God's work is not limited to him. As you think about those around you you will see you can name a few other members. Old members. Faithful members. Those who have gone before us.

5 Romans 12:3

Soon your mind drifts from the present to the past and then we begin to speak of how God worked among His people. Great figures of the faith come to mind. We talk about what God did through His servant Martin Luther. The rich music of Bach. The inspiring hymns of the Church. We see and celebrate God's gifts to the Church, how God calls, gathers, enlightens, and equips members for service in a particular time and place.

Now turn from the past to the present, and the vision changes. The glory fades until we only see a very small group, of very few people, that we speak of as serving God. Our vision is nowhere near the inclusive all-embracing celebration of Paul.

Listen, today, to the apostle Paul. He invites you, today, to trust in God's promises and experience His greater plan for you. God has brought about your salvation in Jesus Christ. He has offered the perfect sacrifice that takes away your sin, that forgives your blindness and opens your eyes to see, and your lives to celebrate, the working of God. God does more than work in the lives of others. He works in your life, for others, in this world. This is why Paul starts to name gifts like teaching, service and mercy. Paul names these few things as examples so that you can see how God is at work in your life. Paul invites you to be transformed by the renewal of your mind. He encourages you to test and discern God's good and gracious will in your life.

Conclusion:

There is a monument east of London at Three Mills Green. It pictures two hands, joined together, in self-sacrificial service.

Over a hundred years ago Thomas Pickett was working in a well. He was overcome by the carbonic acid (the "foul air") that gathered in the well. Godfrey Nicholson responded. He went and reached out his hand to help. He was followed by Frederick Eliot and then Robert Underhill. Each worker, in succession, offering a saving hand in rescue. Each worker dying in the end. To remember these men and their self-sacrificial service, a workers' memorial was erected. Two hands, joined together, in self-sacrificial service.

If you were to go to London, it would be easy to miss this monument. London is filled with so many wondrous things to see. The crown jewels. Big Ben. Buckingham Palace. The changing of the guard, but there, in East London, at Three Mills Green, stands a much more humble sight. A memory of people, ordinary people, who offered their lives in an act of self-love. Their daily vocation became a place for service to others and service to God. This place does not gather

many crowds and it does not inspire tours, but it does recall the way God works in the world through the lives of His people. This is how God's hand reaches into our world. He touches His people, transforming them for service, so that they offer their gifts as a sacrifice of praise.

What this monument does in East London, Paul does with his words in this letter. He calls us to see the glory of God, hidden in the lives of His people, in self-sacrificial service. Our world would have us conform to its ways. Seek glory and power by gaining things for ourselves. In the ways of our world religion can become one more tool we use to make ourselves better. Claiming the power of God to gain glory on earth. God's ways are different. Humble. Hidden. Sacrificial. Selfless.

In a world attracted to glory, the apostle Paul asks you to see God's greater plan for you. You have been joined to the Body of Christ. Made part of His people by the forgiveness of your sins. Paul now invites you, in view of God's mercies, to no longer be conformed to this world but to be transformed for service. To live by giving rather than gaining, by service rather than selfishness.

In this way the Church is the afterimage of the glory of Christ. It reveals the ways of God in the world. We are the Body of Christ, drawn into His public ministry. Our lives are monuments of His self-sacrificial love. Each life touched by the hand of God. Your life joined to the ministry of Christ. "A living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God."

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**

