

## *Offering Ourselves to God*

### **Romans 12:1-15**

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This morning is both Rally Day for Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, and the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great tragedy that befell our nation when terrorists staged their evil attacks on September 11, 2001. Earlier this morning we remembered the events of 9-11 with a time of prayer. Now I want to briefly explore something that happened as a result of the attacks on 9-11. There was an immediate spike in church attendance. That happened the night of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, in the days following, and in the next several weeks and months. I read stories of how people made significant changes as a result of 9-11. Some people who had planned on being divorced found reason to renew their commitment to their spouse and try to work through their problems. For those of us who lived through those dark days the impact cannot be understated. That people made commitments regarding church and marriage and family and life in general is not surprising.

So it was disappointing to find that by January of 2002, just a few months after 9-11, articles were being written about how things had pretty much returned to normal, or to the way they were before the tragedy. Meaning church attendance had gone down to its previous level, and apparently things like divorce had returned to their higher level. An article written in January of 2002 appeared in USA Today with the title, "Quick dose of 9-11 religion soothes, doesn't change." (Gerald L. Zelzer) In exploring why the changes that came with 9-11 did not endure, the author writes, "Lives are only transformed spiritually and permanently when religious experiences accumulate in regular life passages, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, and old age, and when religion is given the chance to repeat itself in fixed rituals and proscribed prayers." Because of that, "Transformative religion is rarely born in spontaneous reactions to events such as September 11, because those kind of cataclysmic happenings are too infrequent and isolated to build permanent and long-lasting faith. The spiritual fires that they ignite are intense, but not durable, even among the already religious."

All of this might well lead us to ask, "Why have Rally Day?" I mean, if an event as dramatic and life-changing as 9-11 didn't cause the kind of transformation in lives that endures, what is something as small as Rally Day going to do to impact lives? Yes, we will hear some inspiring testimonies from our youth. Yes, we will have some typically good Presbyterian cooking. Yes, we will have some fun and fellowship. Yes, we will have some live music. But really, is any of this going to make a real impact, whether on one single life or the life of our church, the community, or the world? Even if we get excited and fired up, isn't there a good chance that in a few weeks or months things will be back to normal.

Maybe so. Maybe so. But fifteen years after 9-11, I'm intrigued by the idea of what would have happened if you made a commitment that day and stuck with it, incorporated it into your life? What if a community had done that, if there had been transformation? Where would you be now? Where would we be now?

What if fifteen years ago you made a commitment to read your bible on a daily basis? Maybe you were realistic, and so you decided to set a goal that you felt you could keep? What if you decided to read your bible for fifteen minutes every day? Apparently someone has figured out if you read your bible out loud, at what they call "pulpit rate", it takes 70 hours and 40 minutes to read through the whole bible. 52 hours and 20 minutes would get you through the Old Testament, and it takes 18 hours and 20 minutes for the New Testament. 70 hours and 40 minutes is nearly three 24 hour days. Oh my goodness! Three whole days! I could never do that. Well, if you read fifteen minutes a day for a whole year you would have read for 91 hours and fifteen minutes. That means in one year you could read the whole once, and you would have time to go back and read the New Testament a second time. That is in one year. If you had committed to fifteen minutes a day of reading your bible fifteen years ago, you would have read the whole bible fifteen times and the New Testament 30 times.

If you prayed five minutes a day, for 365 days, in the past fifteen years you would have prayed for 30 hours in one year and 450 hours over the whole fifteen years. Would you believe that would equal more than eighteen days, twenty four hours a day in prayer. Talk about a prayer vigil.

What if 9-11 made you aware of how important it is to reach out with God's love, maybe by visiting someone, whether they are sick, homebound, going through a loss, even just reaching out to see a friend and remind them you care? What if you spent an hour a week making a visit? You know there are 52 weeks in a year, again multiplied by 15 years since 2001. You would have made 780 visits. Perhaps you are more comfortable writing a note of encouragement or concern. If you jotted three notes a week, even if each note took just five minutes to write, would you believe that in fifteen years you would have written 2, 340 notes!

Don't get me started with baking cookies. If you made a dozen cookies a week and delivered them you would have made 9,360. If you chose to make a baker's dozen you would have more than 10,000. If you made a chicken casserole or one of the other things we take on a monthly basis to the Warm Shelter for our Deacon's Dinner, and you made something every month, and you did it for 15 years and we fed on average 30 people at each meal, you would have helped to feed 5,400 people. Now even though Jesus fed 5,000 in one day, wouldn't it still be significant and meaningful if you helped 5,000 over fifteen years?

If you started volunteering at the Jonnycake Center fifteen years ago and if you believe what our scripture says today that we are all part of the Body of Christ, your volunteer efforts at the Jonnycake Center would have had an incredible impact. Last year Jonnycake served 2,627 people, giving away \$114,281, provided 209, 929 meals, along with 849 turkeys at Thanksgiving and Christmas and 548 Christmas gifts to children. 209,929 meals multiplied by 15 gives you more than 3,000,000 meals. If you just gave one hour a week you would be part of something so meaningful. And that is true at Jonnycake or Habitat or the hospital or any of a hundred other places that help people.

If, if, if...if something as major as 9-11 didn't cause people to make lasting changes, what is a little old Rally Day going to accomplish in terms of transformation? Well, a little old Rally Day doesn't stand alone in the life of the church. It is part of worship and service and fellowship and spiritual growth in a community that nurtures and equips and offers and challenges and supports people in the process of transformation. The article that critiqued the short-lived changes from 9-11 said, "Lives are only transformed spiritually and permanently when religious experiences accumulate in regular life passages, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, and old age, and when religion is given the chance to repeat itself in fixed rituals and proscribed prayers." If we only raised our voices and hooted and hollered on Rally Day and then didn't get together until next year on Rally Day I am certain nothing would change in our lives. But we are going to raise our voices and hoot and holler today, and then we'll come back next week, and we will worship, and we will study, and we will gather together in fellowship and support and ministry, and because God is active and present in our world and in our life together there will be transformation, and there will be growth, and there will be love that is shared in countless ways.

Fifteen years after 9-11, you are here. You are here today. You might not have been as faithful as you wanted, you might have started and stopped, teetered and tottered, stumbled and maybe even staggered, but you are here today. And you are not here alone. We are here together. As the Body of Christ, God is transforming us, and shaping us, and creating a community where Christ Jesus lives in us and the Holy Spirit empowers us and the word of God guides and directs us, and so we do change. We do grow. We do mature. And maybe we didn't read the bible 15 times in the last 15 years or do all of the other things we might have done, but think how much has happened through just this one church over the last fifteen years. And you have been part of that. And you are part of that. So Rally Day is not just if, if, if...Rally Day is the people of God doing exactly what Paul calls us to do. Rally Day is offering themselves to God. You are not called to do everything that needs to be done in this church and this community and in the world. But you are part of the Body of Christ. And there is a place for you and a need for you and areas where you can grow and mature and develop as a child of God.

What can we learn from Romans 12 as we offer ourselves to God?

- Every gift matters. What every person offers matters. That is what the analogy of the Body of Christ means. All these different parts are all important and necessary and no part of the Body and no task within the Body and no one who offers their gifts for the Body is to be looked down on. “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...” Don’t think too highly of yourself or of one gift or function in the Body. Every gift matters.
- But if every gift matters, that means your gift matters. You have something to give that only you can give because it is your gift to give and you are part of the Body of Christ and your gift matters. We have different gifts, and you have gifts that are needed. If it is prophesying, prophecy; if it is serving, serve; if it is teaching, teach; if it is encouraging, encourage; if it is giving, give generously; if it is leadership, lead; if it is mercy, be merciful. Your gift matters.
- Offer your gift and offer yourself in love. “Love must be sincere.”
- Be a person who builds up the Body. “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord....rejoice with those who rejoice...weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another.”

I spent quite a bit of time this morning trying to show what could have happened if we had made some commitments that were lasting over the last fifteen years. I was hoping to persuade you to see what our future can be if we commit to growing and learning and serving and giving. Whether it persuaded you are not, I have to admit I was staggered at what can take place when people participate in the community of faith, the Body of Christ, and allow ourselves to be transformed and shaped into the image of Christ. In some ways I was casting a vision for where we could be fifteen years from now. I was looking to the future for encouragement and inspiration.

But that is not where Paul looks when he calls us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God. Paul isn’t looking at the future saying, “Here is all that can happen if we just offer ourselves to God.” What Paul does is look back. He begins Romans 12 by taking a look back. He uses an intriguing phrase. He says, “In view of God’s mercy.” Paul is looking back on God’s mercy, and if we look back with Paul at what he has written in Romans, God’s mercy is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The mercy of God has been demonstrated in that while human beings were stuck in sin, Christ Jesus died for us. But it is more than that. What we come to understand is that Christ died for us because he loves us, because God loves us.

We as humans spend so much time holding tightly to life, trying to grab hold of love and blessing and meaning and purpose, and God comes into our world in the person of Jesus Christ and says, “If you want to save your life, you must lose it.” And then he lost his life, and in losing his life, he saved ours.

We want to hold so tightly to life, and Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that they would lay down their life for their friends.” And then he lay down his life for us, because he loves us.

We hold so tightly to the wrongs that are done to us, harboring animosity toward our enemies, and then Jesus comes and says to the very ones who are putting him to death, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

We find ourselves acting like James and John, fighting over who is the greatest and who gets to sit in the highest seat of honor, and Jesus says, “If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, learn to be a servant. Learn to be the least, the smallest.” And then he gets down on his knees and washes the feet of his disciples.

I guess Rally Day could be a day when we look forward and say if, if, if...if we give and serve and study and learn look at all that can happen. But isn't Rally Day really a day when we look back, when we look back at Jesus, the Son of God who was born into this world and showed us how to live and how to love and who gave his life as a ransom for many. Isn't Rally Day a day when we look at the mercy of God, revealed in this incredible person named Jesus, who reached out to touch the least, the last, and the lost...who reached out to touch you and me and the stranger and the alien and the highest and the lowest and every person in between? Isn't Rally Day a day to look back at the mercy God has shown us in Jesus and then to look at our lives and say, “Everything we are and everything we have and everything we do belongs to Jesus.” Therefore in view of God's mercy, present yourself as a living sacrifice...offer yourself to God. And instead of being conformed to the patterns of this world, our lives will transformed into the image of Christ Jesus, the one who is our Lord and our Savior.