

**Exodus 1:15-2:10**

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

**Romans 12:1-8**

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. 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.

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. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**“Body Talk: Being Shaped by God’s Love”**

One of my favorite authors is Anne Lamott, a Presbyterian from northern California. I love her writing because she is so honest. She has the guts to admit things about herself and all of humanity in a quirky, yet humble and self-confessing tone—always leaving room for God’s grace. In one collection of her short stories she wrote about how difficult it was for her to be constantly attentive to her son’s self-interested world. “Look at me...No one can do this as well as I can!” Sam would say while jumping off a log or something. Anne knew that children’s egos are built by encouragement, so she tried to listen with interest to what Sam said. Her intellectualism would get the best of her though and she would often reflect that before Sam she could not have been paid enough money to listen so attentively to any person’s world-of-self.

A world-of-self in childhood is one thing. In the life of the church it breaks apart the body of Christ and denies God as the giver of gifts to all. In adults a world-of-self leads us astray as we congratulate ourselves for our accomplishments, belittle others, and refuse to give credit to the One who gave us all our gifts in the first place.

The church is a body, not a self. Individuals within the church are members of the one body of Jesus Christ. There is, or should be, no hierarchy here and there is no place for rugged individualism in the body of Christ. Instead we are to be members, for and with the body, this community.

There is no denying that we are different from one another. In reality the church is often a motley irreconcilable group. Despite our differences Paul claims that each one of us and every person who enters the life of the church has gifts that display a bit of Jesus, our Christ. We need each member because the church is nothing unless it is the full body of Christ. When we become bound by self-interest, by ego or by fear, the quality of our life together is dramatically affected and members suffer from the lack of love and mercy.

Within the body there is no room for triumphing over one another or for feeling we do not belong. Everyone belongs, just as they are, except we are all being continually transformed by the renewal of our minds by God's grace. Borrowing a line from the movie *Jerry Maguire*, Christ calls us to say to one another "you complete me." It is ridiculous, but true! We are called to say, "you complete me" (*and mean it*) to people who we are not in romantic relationships with. The gifts of the body complete one another despite the fact that our interests are totally different and we would never choose on our own to be intentionally close with the whole of this group. We can't even agree on basic theology. Yet Paul is insistent that as a whole we, no less than early Christians who worshiped side-by-side as slave and free, Greek and Jew, are the body of Christ! The early church knew the challenge of living in response to God's mercies. Paul wrote them about their behavior to one another. "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." We are equally members of the body, yet we are diverse. So judgment against others, arrogance towards them, gossip about the body, self-elevation--all these become stumbling blocks to discerning the will of God. They prevent us from seeing God's gift in the other. Gifts given in grace are not for tearing down. God's gifts become manifest only when we build the body.

We are not together today because we are the same. We are together because we could not resist the grace of Jesus, God's sovereignty, and the power of the Spirit. God made us into a body.

In our passage Paul claims that following God's will and way leaves no room for individual bragging rights. When we actually follow God's will Paul tells us it is the gift of grace that works within us. Just as Jesus' life, work and resurrection are a gift of grace; all our faithful responses to God are also a gift of grace. These gifts are never our own. They are for God's glory and for the benefit one another. This knowledge makes me very humble. Karl Barth says that our passage today makes every human mind understand God as the "great disturber."<sup>1</sup> God is the disturber of our self-interested

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 424.

thoughts and actions. God disturbs and continually renews our minds through grace, leading us to repentance, confession and continual transformation into new life.

In this new life we are the body of Christ, given gifts to point to God. Imagine your life as one big arrow, pointing towards the One who is grace, mercy, sovereign, compassion, justice and love. All there is for us to do as we accept that God is the maker of our gifts is to express thankfulness. Thankfulness for God's abiding love despite all that we are. Do not fear humility. We need humility if we are to thrive as the body for "those in fellowship in Christ are motivated by their thankfulness to God for the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup>

If you have ever wondered what you are doing here or if God really has a purpose for you, Roman's 12 leaves no doubt, "For Paul every member's contribution is important...because the church lives by Christ's own life in it."<sup>3</sup>

We cannot achieve goodness and perfection, following the entire will of God as we are commanded. Yet the continual renewal of our minds brought about by faith in Jesus Christ and the Spirit's presence challenges us to live as members of the body. Faithfulness is made manifest in thankfulness for this diverse group and all the ways Christ is present in each one of us. Do not be conformed to this world. Instead be shaped by God's love, as members of the body, responding to God's gifts in Christ and to each one of us, like an arrow who points to the unending mercy of our sovereign God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 424.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Bryant, "Romans 12:1-8," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, (July 2004): 289.

<sup>3</sup> Charles B. Cousar, *The Letters of Paul*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 144.