
ALTARED BODIES

ROMANS 12:1-21

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 23, 2020,
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Human bodies have always been on the line, have always been at risk, have always been threatened with death, have even been sacrificed because certain bodies have been viewed as *other*. Bodies are on the line because certain bodies are deemed dispensable and disposable, so they can be disregarded and discarded. This is why we've had historical colonial slavery. This is why there was the long, long line of those dead bodies spread over the table of Holocaust terror—emaciated bodies in a valley of dry bones. This is why we have sexual assault and high percentages of it on university campuses. This is why those who are differently-abled, the so-called disabled, have been ridiculed and denigrated as subhuman in public spaces. This is why young people, young bodies, can be sacrificed on the altar of the economy where the mighty dollar rules, even during a global pandemic. Bodies have always been on the line.

Bodies are on the line during this COVID-19 reality, aren't they? Senior citizens to little children. All types of bodies are at risk, have been at risk, have died. No one, nobody is immune. Over 174,000 people have died in the United States. 174,000 bodies. Struggling to breathe even with an oxygen mask. Struggling to live and over 174,000 didn't make it. This is no joke. Human bodies are no joke.

Attacks on human bodies whether intentionally due to violence or unintentionally, as with the violence of a virus, have always disturbed me, because there is something about the destruction of human bodies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, that is an assault on God because God became a human body in Jesus. To me, the Incarnation of God in Christ is the affirmation of human bodies, the blessing of God on all flesh, all bodies.

It's no wonder then that the Apostle Paul tells the church at Corinth, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" Bodies should matter to us because they matter to God. Our human bodies house divine presence. God inhabits our bodies. Our bodies are sites of the Spirit.

This is why Paul can tell the Romans, "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." Present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God as your spiritual or reasonable worship. He didn't say present your buildings as a living sacrifice to God. But present your breathing bodies. Present your fleshy temples of the Spirit.

This is so important during this time of COVID-19 when the body of Christ as a whole cannot gather together inside church buildings or sanctuaries. Many of you are at home watching this service and not inside this beloved building, this "great towering church," in all of its beauty and splendor that was built for the glory of God. Many of you miss this place and being together with one another or singing in the choir or collecting the offering as ushers or fellowshiping after the service with Locopops. People miss this building with all of the memories and meaning-making and relationship-making that occurs in a church. I get it. Even when we were closed for one year for restoration work on this building several years ago, I got it. I, too, missed being in this sacred space, this building.

Yet I was reminded by a former Duke President that buildings serve human purposes. Humans don't serve the building. Humans built this neo-gothic structure and this building was created for the glory of God. But that is different from saying the building worships God because buildings can't present themselves as a living sacrifice, rather when people are in the building, in Duke Chapel, worship happens. When bodies are present, worship occurs. Worship doesn't happen in a building if there are no people, no bodies, in it. Buildings don't worship God. Bodies do.

When there's no building, when you're without a building for worship in times like these, remember the building, the tabernacle, the temple is you. When you aren't in a sanctuary or can't be in a building, you still have your body. And your bodies are the living sacrifice to God as worship. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" You are a cathedral for Christ, right where you are this morning around a coffee table or sitting on a couch or just listening on your bed. Present your bodies as living sacrifices of worship.

Don't let anyone try to convince you that worship ceases when you are outside of a church sanctuary. If our theology of worship is empty without a building, then we have a thin theology of worship. If we need an organ or a choir or a preacher or a liturgy to engage in worship, that is a thin theology of worship, because even in your home, at your school, outside at a community non-profit, in the woods, on the streets in faithful protest against wrong, worship can happen because your bodies can be living sacrifices to God.

This doesn't mean our grief and sense of loss goes away from not gathering together for worship inside a building. It doesn't mean we don't miss each other and miss the rituals that bring so much life to so many people. The gathered community is so vital. But God wants us to have a wider understanding of worship, of what it means to offer ourselves to God from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things (Rom 7:36). We have this wonderful opportunity to still worship God wherever we are because we have our bodies and where our bodies are, worship can be. Our bodies can be altars before God.

Romans should ignite our imagination and expand our theology of worship. I extended the lectionary reading today to verse 21 to give us a fuller sense of what worship is in this setting. There's no mention of a literal temple or religious space. There's only the exhortation to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Your bodies as liturgical texts for worship in the world. What a gift to offer living sacrifices to God as worship through our bodies.

There's no mention of traditional liturgical rituals because for Paul in Romans, worship *is* ethics, not worship and ethics, but worship is ethics. This living sacrifice of your bodies to God as worship includes such things as: "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think" "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good" "love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." "Live in harmony with one another... do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil... live peaceably with all." This is worship. Paul teaches all of this with the hope that we would aspire to be one unified body in Christ. He reveals how worship is ethics and includes your whole life, your total selves, your bodies, every act, every relationship; worship is individual, communal, and social. This is the living sacrifice to God as worship—that is, how you live in the world with other people, including your enemy.

This bodily worship in the world is more difficult than making the sign of a cross in a worship service or singing a hymn or kneeling. This is worship meeting ethics, worship meeting witness, worship meeting your enemy. "If your enemies are hungry [Paul says], feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." This might make you second guess presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice to God as worship because this is worship as nonviolent, selfless, unconditional love for the harmony and peace that only God can give.

Congressman John Lewis who recently died put his body on the line as a living sacrifice to God throughout his life. Lewis was a major civil rights leader struggling for racial justice and equality. On the so-called "Bloody Sunday" on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965, he put his life on the line literally during a peaceful protest as they were beaten by police and Lewis had his skull cracked. Rev. Raphael Warnock, at Lewis' funeral, said that he was beaten, battered but never bitter. What you might not know is that Lewis was a Christian and wrestled with a call to ministry and when he was growing up, he was known to preach to chickens! He actually became an ordained Baptist minister, but as Rev. Warnock said, instead of preaching sermons, Lewis became one. He became a sermon as he worked toward a just society where all people are treated as human beings of worth and value, affirming that every person is a child of God. Lewis' call wasn't to be in the pulpit or sanctuary per se. He presented his body as a living sacrifice to God as worship on the street in the world. His worship was

policy-making and pursuing advocacy on behalf of the least of these in society. His worship was ethics and his body was offered as an altar for God's glory in the public square. Shortly before his death, he wrote an essay for the New York Times, which was actually published on the day of his funeral. He wrote, "In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way."

"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." What's so challenging about Lewis' life is that he offered his bodily worship amid tensions in the nation, past and present. For Paul, worship as ethics was so critical because he sent his letter amid the tensions between Jews and Gentiles in Rome. Offering bodies as worship at a time of peace is one thing but doing so when there's a lot of tension and anxiety over the political scene, even in our nation, is another thing.

What does it mean to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God, to put your bodies on the line, at risk, during the times in which we live? Paul's words are sobering because the affection he calls for may not be mutual. Your humility and hospitality might be met with hostility. Presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice and placing it on the altar for God is a risk because you risk receiving hate, you risk rejection, you risk misunderstanding. Bodily, ethical worship means you offer kindness rather than killing each other with words. It means you extend empathy instead of pity. It means you show vulnerable love instead of vicious hate. This is reasonable worship for Christians, then and now, and this happens through your bodies not buildings. It is a living somatic sacrifice for the good of the whole, for the one body, always striving for harmony, always seeking peace. This is worship as ethics, the offering of ourselves in everyday life.

Will you place your body on the altar for God this year? Will you put your body on the line for your neighbor this year? Will you do what you can to keep them safe during a global pandemic? Will you do what you can to let them know that you care and they are loved? I see the COVID-19 safety guidelines as a sacrifice of our bodies for the whole body. Who wants to wear a mask? Who wants to keep social distance when in person? I get it. It's not easy. It's not comfortable. But I see the social distancing as an act of social solidarity. I see all the safety protocols as presenting my body as a living sacrifice to God as worship. Worship as social ethics. It is self-control as worship for the greater good. It is love of neighbor. It is hospitality to strangers. It is not thinking of yourself more highly than you ought. It is honoring another person's life by wearing a mask. It's a reminder that we are all connected and to use Paul's words, "members of one another." How we live impacts others. What we do with our bodies impacts the one body. We put our bodies on the line for God and for others. Our worship is ethics as we present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God in the world.

If we follow the way of Jesus, this is a clarion call for us. Jesus put his body on the cross and offered his body on the altar of God's love for the world as an act of sacrificial worship. There may be no community gatherings in a building for worship, but there is still your body to offer worship every day wherever you are and wherever you go. And as you offer yourselves on the altar as a sacrificial love offering to God and for your neighbor, may these words of Jesus become your own, "This is my body given for you."