

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

First German Evangelical Lutheran Church

A Lifetime of Learning

Romans 12:1-8

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.⁴ Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,⁵ so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.⁷ If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach;⁸ if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

On Monday, First German Lutheran School opens its doors to a new school year. This is not the first time this will happen. In fact, it has happened every year for the past 153 years. Why is that? Why do kids need to come to school here? I'm sure if you took a poll, many of them wouldn't mind staying home a few more months. Many of them probably wouldn't mind if you cancelled school altogether. But that is a silly idea. Why is it so silly? We have a pretty good understanding that kids need to go to school. They need to go to school and they need to learn. The little ones need to learn how to read and write. The older ones need to learn about the world around them. No matter what any of them might tell you, they don't know everything. There is always more learning to be done. And it doesn't even end after they graduate from our grade school. There are four more years left at high school. And then there is still more learning to be done. Perhaps it will happen in college, or in the workforce, or in the armed forces or somewhere else. And it never ends. As long as we live, we understand that there is always more we can learn and know. This truth, which applies in the world of academics, also applies in our spiritual lives. As we look closely at God's Word in the book of Romans today, we'll see just what it is we need to keep learning spiritually and why it is so important that our lives continue to be lives of learning and growth.

Our text begins with a very important word. It is the word “therefore.” Whenever you come across that word in the Bible it is good to ask the question: “What is the therefore there for?” Therefore means that the author is drawing a conclusion based on some facts. If you want to understand the conclusion, you have to know the facts. In this case the apostle Paul is really making a reference to the first 11 chapters of the book of Romans. It is based on everything that he has written previously that he makes the urgent plea we find in the verses of our text. So what are the facts that Paul has stated so far in the book of Romans that we need to learn if we want to continue?

It would be great for us to do a verse by verse study of the book of Romans here together, but you probably want to get home sometime before bedtime. So let’s at least look at the highlights. The highlights of the opening chapters of Romans are really the highlights of the entire Bible, because Romans is a clear explanation of the central teaching of all of Scripture: the teaching of sin and grace. Just as the kindergarteners need to learn their ABC’s this year, we need to learn these very basic teachings of Scripture.

In the first few chapters of Romans we learn about sin. You might think that this is not something we need to learn about. We all know sin pretty well. After all, none of us are perfect, right? The truth is that we need to learn just how completely sinful we are and what the terrible consequences of sin are. This is especially true when we live in a day and age when many sins are excused or looked past as simply “mistakes” or “errors in judgment.” The bible has a different picture for sin. It says that sin is something God hates and that sin must be punished by God. As Romans 6:23 says plainly: “*The wages of sin is death.*” There is no escaping this reality. It is good for us to learn about sin and to see our own sins. We need to examine our lives in the light of God’s commandments to us and see just how far short we have fallen of God’s standard.

The opening chapters of the book of Romans also teach us the other important thing we need to learn about: God’s grace. This is something we could know nothing about except for the fact that God has told us about it in his Word. The Word reveals God’s grace to us. And what an amazing grace it is! In the opening chapters of Romans, the apostle Paul not only highlights how completely sinful the world is, but also how completely loving God is in sending his Son to die for a world of sinners. The book of Romans clearly reveals the fact that through faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin we are justified. That means we are declared not guilty of our sins and we have eternal life. This is certainly something that we need to learn about and learn about often.

Why is it so important for us to learn the ABC's of faith—the truth of sin and God's grace? It is so important because these are more than mere facts. These truths bring us life and peace. And these truths work a desire in us—a desire to give thanks to God and serve him. It is this desire that the apostle Paul addresses when he encourages us to “*offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.*” He calls this our “*spiritual act of worship.*” Because of the great mercy God has shown us, we want to offer our whole body to his service. This is quite a transformation. But this act of serving God is something that also requires a lifetime of learning.

This learning begins with a transformation. It begins by changing the way we think. As the Spirit says through the apostle Paul, “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.*” Growing in service to God means learning about what his will for us is. It means that instead of putting our minds to work thinking about how we can best serve our self-interest, we put our minds to work discovering the best way we can serve our Savior.

We can do this by learning something about ourselves—about who we are and the gifts God has given us. The apostle Paul encourages us: “*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*” With these words, we are encouraged to think about what God has given to us. The greatest gift that God has given us is faith. Along with the faith he has also measured out different gifts to each of us. None of us should think too highly of ourselves and think that God has given us so many and wonderful gifts that we are better than other people. Nor should we think of ourselves too lowly and think that we have not been given any gifts with which to serve God. Rather, we should think of ourselves with sober judgment—take a good look at all the different talents and abilities we have been given and then ask ourselves, “How can I use this gift in God's kingdom?” This is all a part of the process of Christian learning and growing.

But so what? Why do we need to learn these things? I'm sure the teachers are getting prepared to answer that question more than one time throughout the school year. It's also a question we need to answer in a spiritual sense. Why is it so important to learn about God's grace and then about the gifts and abilities God has given us? What does God say in our reading? “*Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,⁵ so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*” We need to realize that we are a part of something greater—something called the body of Christ. The other members of that body are depending on us to continue to learn and grow and function in the body. Otherwise,

the whole body suffers. When we are growing and serving, the body is built up and God is ultimately glorified. It is a beautiful thing when Christians put their gifts to work to serve others as we hear described in the last verses of our text: *“If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.⁷ If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach;⁸ if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”*

Learning is not always an easy task. Just ask the students a couple of months from now and I'm sure they will be able to tell you about how it takes a lot of work to understand all the facts and concepts they are being taught it. It's not easy, but it is worth it. The same is true of spiritual learning. It sometimes is work. Our sinful nature is fighting against it and telling us that we don't need to learn anything more about God or his will for us. But when put in the effort. When we come to church. When we read our Bibles. When we attend Sunday School and Bible Study, it is greatly rewarding. We are learning the most important truths there are: truths that effect our eternity. We are also learning new and meaningful ways to serve our God with the gifts he has given us. Let's never stop learning these things. May God bless our work in his spiritual classroom this year and the rest of our lives. **Amen.**

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