

“GROWING OUR FAITH”

Romans 12:1-8 August 27, 2017

On Monday, August 21st, everyone in North America plus parts of South America, Africa, and Europe saw at least a partial solar eclipse. For those of us fortunate enough to view the eclipse in Wyoming, it appeared as though the sun disappeared in the middle of the day. I was with a group from Pine Bluff’s Community Center who went up to a farm near Yoder to observe the eclipse. We were hoping to observe a few minutes of totality where the sun is completely covered by the moon with only the sun’s corona visible. That is exactly what we experienced and it was awesome! During that period of dusk in the middle of the day we did hear the crickets start their chirping and there were sunsets all around us. The event was memorable on many levels and one I personally will not soon forget.

Now in that brief period of darkness it would have been weird if the people living in Idaho Falls, Idaho, or Casper, Wyoming—two of the cities in the path of the total solar eclipse—brushed their teeth and changed into their pajamas at 11:00 or 11:45 am as the eclipse neared totality. We knew the darkness wouldn’t last long, so we didn’t react to it. We instead acted on what we knew. It would be silly for us to act on what our senses told us and get ready for bed. Instead, we trusted what we couldn’t see but knew to be true. The sun was coming back and all would be well!

In the book of Hebrews, the author talks about faith as “the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see” (Hebrews 11:1 CEB). As people of faith, we find comfort in knowing there is more to life than what we perceive with our senses. Hebrews 11 recounts the stories of many from the Old

Testament who learned by faith of God's presences in their lives. Noah knew God would save him and his family through the flood. Abraham and Sarah believed that God would make a great nation from them, even though they were old & childless. The passage also mentions the faith of others like Rehab, David, Samuel, and the prophets. All of these believed in the promises of God, even when life appeared dark.

Their faith in God comforted them, but it was also a call. Each acted on God's promises before they had come to fruition. Noah built the ark before it started raining. Abraham and Sarah trusted God and moved before they knew the final destination, and (eventually) trusted that God would provide them with a son. After listing people of faith from the past in Hebrews 11, the twelfth chapter begins with a call for each of us to live by faith. "So then let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us," the scriptures continue, "since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us."

There are times when many of us experience what we might call a spiritual eclipse. Something gets in the way and we struggle to see the light of Christ we know is always there. During those times, it can be easy to be fooled into reacting to the darkness of our circumstances, like the animals getting ready for the night during the solar eclipse. Our faith in Jesus calls us to live differently, beyond our senses.

Even during the darkest times, we know by faith that God puts a path before us and calls us to follow. By faith, we also know that we do not go alone. We are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses" that includes those named in the faith hall of fame of Hebrews 11 and the saints who have influenced our spiritual formation.

As we experienced the solar eclipse of August 21, or whenever we experience a spiritual eclipse, let us remember to act not only on what we experience with our senses, but at all times and in all circumstances to live by faith.

Living by faith. Today is the third and last message of our short series on Romans. God's calling and gifts cannot be called back. As we step out in faith, placing all of our allegiance in Jesus, we remember with Paul that we disciples of Jesus are not the only people to whom our God has made covenant promises. And so we step out in our faith in Jesus while stepping toward our Jewish sisters and brothers through God's promises to Abraham. We step toward these spiritual siblings with respect for God's irrevocable calling and promises to them, and, at the same time, confessing and seeking to be faithful to God's irrevocable calling and gifts to us as those who have been born anew to a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Peter 1:3).

We step out into our own identity in Christ. We step toward others in our extended family. And we step forth, both within the community of the church and toward the wider world, in the power of the spiritual gifts we have been given, whatever these may be.

There are so many talented people in the world and I am thankful and amazed by their spiritual gifts. Perhaps you will appreciate this story: It is about a wholesaler in New York who sent a letter to the postmaster of a small Midwestern town. He asked for the name of an honest lawyer who would take a collection case against a local debtor. In this case, however, I also happen to be the person you sold those crummy goods to. I received your demand to pay and refused to honor it. I am also the banker you sent the draft to draw on the merchant, and I sent that back with a note stating that the merchant refused

to pay. And if I were not, for the time being, substituting for the pastor of our local church, I would tell you just where to stick your claim.

Not many of us are as multi-talented as that postmaster. There are many things that I cannot do well and most things I cannot do at all. But we all have our gifts.

As talented as the great theoretical physicist was, even Albert Einstein experienced feelings of inadequacy. In 1948 Einstein was offered the first presidency of the new nation of Israel. He turned it down with this statement:

“I am deeply moved by the offer from our State of Israel [to serve as President], and at once saddened and ashamed that I cannot accept it. All of my life I have dealt with objective matters, hence I lack both the natural aptitude and the experience to deal properly with people and to exercise official functions. For these reasons alone I should be unsuited to fulfill the duties of that high office...”

Dr. Einstein knew plenty about the nature of the universe, but this wise and insightful man also knew that he lacked the necessary political skill for such a demanding position. Is there really any shame in knowing our limitations? He focused on that which he did well and the world is the better for it.

You may or may not recognize it, but you have the capacity to do some things well. In fact, very well. Few of us will ever be Einsteins, but we can still contribute meaningfully to life. And when we know what it is we can do and decide to do that particular thing, we just might discover happiness.

Paul reminded his contemporaries at Rome **why** we have been given gifts, **what** some of these gifts are, and **how** to make the best use of them.

Why does God give us spiritual gifts? It's so we have the resources we need to offer ourselves to God! This is what Paul starts to describe in verse 1

when he talks about “present [ing] our bodies as a living sacrifice.” Paul is not asking first century Christians in Rome, or us today, to cast ourselves on sacrificial altars. Nor is God looking for us to give something we don’t have. Nor does God intend for us to manufacture something to offer to God. That’s not how sacrifices work in God’s economy. Instead, we offer to God from the bounty God has already given us. So God gives us everything we need to offer ourselves to God in a way that is “holy and acceptable.”

Some translations, including the NRSV, speak of this “offering our bodies” as “our spiritual worship.” A less “forced” translation would be “reasonable public service.” This word choice points to the way in which Paul extends the metaphor of our participation in specific ritual acts as Christians (sacrifice) to a whole life of service, not just worship. Just as we offer physical gifts and prayers to God in sacrifice in worship, so also we are called to offer the spiritual gifts we have been given in our life of public service, both in the context of the church communities and its needs and in the wider world.

So our first act of stepping forth in our spiritual gifts is to recognize these gifts aren’t for us to keep for ourselves, but for us to offer to God, in all the ways and places we can make use of them.

Paul goes on to emphasize that simply because we have been given such gifts we should not use that as a basis for any of us to assert our own superiority over anyone else. The “worldly” way of approaching giftedness is to assign greater honor and privilege to those it decides are “most gifted” or having the “most important gifts,” however the local culture determines these rankings. However, this attitude is so incorrect that Paul takes pains to say to us “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds (verse

2, NRSV). We are not to use these worldly judgements at all! Instead, the way we value the gifts we are given is with careful attentiveness to what God has given each of us. It is to trust that what we have been given by God is exactly what is needed for us, and from us, for the common good. No more is needed, and no less. What God has given is enough, and often more than enough!!

So the second act of stepping forth in our spiritual gifts is to be assured of the sufficiency of these gifts for God's purposes in our lives and the life of the world. No comparisons, just quiet confidence as we step forth.

Now, and only now, does Paul begin to offer an incomplete list of what some of those gifts are and how we might each apply God's way of considering them and using them and growing them so we can offer ourselves ever more fully in sacrifice to God and service to others.

We grow in our capacity to use the gift of prophecy—proclaiming God's ways into the lives of others—as our own faith increases. We grow in exercising gifts of service as we actually serve. We don't grow by calling ourselves servants of others, but in the course of serving itself. Similarly, we grow in our capacity to teach others by the practice of teaching, and in our capacity to offer encouragement and challenge to others as we offer such encouragement and challenge.

We grow as givers as we grow in our own generosity. There is no plateau where we can say we have “arrived” or congratulate ourselves. We become better leaders as we become more reliable in our relationships and duties of leadership toward others, not simply as we obtain (or refer to) leadership positions and titles. And we become more compassionate as we keep cultivating --wait for it—not “feeling deeply for others” but, rather, gratitude. Gratitude, not

pity, is the fuel of compassion (verses 5-8).

All of these gifts are about the outflow, the self-offering, the sacrifice. The Spirit's gifts are intended to be poured out on the world through us just as we pour out our lives before God in worship.

It's in stepping out at using these and other gifts the Spirit has given us, not focusing on having them in the first place, that we grow in our capacity to offer ourselves to God and in public service to the church and the wider world.

So, as we conclude this series, how are you doing, yourself, and how are we doing (or getting better at) taking these three kinds of steps in the Christian walk?

How are you doing with entrusting your whole life to Christ, grounded in and supported by the life of the Triune God? How can we help each other do this better? And how can we offer a better public witness to it through our public-facing ministries as a congregation than we currently do?

How are you doing with stepping toward your Jewish and Christian neighbors? And how can we as a congregation take better next steps in that direction?

And especially for all of us today, how are you doing at stepping forth in the gifts God has given you—better at offering yourself to God, at approaching these gifts not as markers of superiority or rank, but as indicators of how to serve and grow in service, and better at the ministries you are active in, whether in this congregation, or in the wider community? And how can we as a congregation improve our support of your growth in ministry going forward?

Hear Christ's call and respond. Step out. Step forward. And step forth as the Spirit leads. Amen and amen.