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First Things First

Luke 12:32-40 (NRSV)

Romans 12:1-2 (from The Message)

Did you listen to the words from Paul,
those words Reed read a few minutes ago,
words from Paul's letter to the church at Rome?
*"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you:
Take your everyday, ordinary life—
your sleeping, eating,
going-to-work, and walking-around life—
and place it before God as an offering."*

There it is:
that's our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.
That's what it is to ground our lives in faith:
To place our lives before God as an offering;
not just our Sunday lives,
when we are on our best behavior;
No, our ordinary lives,
our everyday lives.
As Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's words:
*our sleeping, eating,
going-to-work,
and walking-around lives.*

It's that simple.
It's that hard.

We hear those words and we might think,
that might work for a monk, or a nun—
someone who lives a cloistered life,
someone who devotes every waking minute of their lives to God,
to godly living,
whose every day is filled with prayer, hymns,
contemplation, devotion;
someone for whom
the outside world is kept ...outside.

We, you and I,
we have families who need our time and energy;
jobs that demand our attention;
homes that need work;
neighbors, friends, hobbies.
We have things to do,

paychecks to earn,
 classes to attend,
 people to deal with.

We're busy, our lives full.

How can we possibly make our lives an offering to God?

Paul understood that,
 even 2000 years ago.

What he was saying to the Romans back then,
 and what he is saying to you and me, here and now
 is yes, I understand that you have your lives to live,
 I get it.

But still: ground your life in God;

root your life in Christ;

open your life to the Spirit:

*“your everyday, ordinary life—
 your sleeping, eating,
 going-to-work, and walking-around life.”*

Start small,

and then build, a bit each day -

and not just on Sundays!

In time, your life,

every bit of it,

will become more and more an offering,
 a joyful, rich offering to God.

What Paul is teaching us in this passage

is that we are to be,

as the Swiss theologian Karl Barth once put it,

Christians by conviction,

rather than simply by convention.

We're to be Christians fully,

completely,

committed,

convicted,

each day,

every day,

all day.

“Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture,”

Paul warns us,

“that you fit into it without even thinking.

Instead, fix your attention on God.”

Paul is right: We're to fix our attention on God.

Fix our attention on Christ,

Fix our attention on God's Holy Spirit.

Paul knew we can probably do this
 for an hour or so on Sunday,
 and here and there throughout the week,
 without too much exertion or difficulty.
 But Paul reminds us that God wants us all, all the time,
 that Jesus isn't satisfied with having us just on Sundays,
 or just when it's convenient for us.

Paul knows us well:
 we're much more likely
 to become well-adjusted to our culture
 fitting in, comfortably,
 because it is so easy for us to do that.
 What Paul is doing is reminding us that Jesus calls us to new life,
 a new way of living.
 Embrace that new life, Paul tells us,
 and we'll *"be changed from the inside out.*
Recognize what [God] wants from you,
and quickly respond to it.
Unlike the culture around you,
always dragging you down to its level of immaturity,
God brings the best out of you,
develops well-formed maturity in you."

Paul knew what we sometimes don't fully grasp:
 the new life offered us in Christ is a better life
 better for us, each of us,
 than the life our prevailing culture offers us,
 even as we create our culture,
 even with the many things our culture
 our everyday life might offer us,
 things we like, things we're drawn to.

But we know, don't we,
 that the culture around us can and often does
 drag us down
 with every dreary tweet,
 every nasty, judgmental talking head,
 every senseless, mindless violent act.
 It's hard not to be dragged down
 when our culture seems increasingly
 built on ignorance,
 fear, hatred,
 division, and violence.

That's not the life Jesus calls us to,
and Paul knew it.

Jesus calls us to a life grounded in love,
peace,
grace:

"Do not be afraid, little flock,"

Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson,

"for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Sell your possessions, and give alms.

*Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out,
an unfailing treasure in heaven,*

where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Do you hear what Jesus is saying to us:

We're called to refocus our lives,

reorient our lives, refresh and renew our lives

to embrace more completely the life Jesus calls us to;

the life that begins with Jesus' two Great commandments

that we are to love God with all our heart,

all our mind,

all our strength,

all our soul,

and that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Over the centuries, we've tended to make this life of faith,

this life of Christ,

complicated, difficult:

more focused on having the right beliefs,

accepting the right creeds,

thinking about the Lord's Supper or baptism

or how we interpret the Bible

in just the right way.

The life we're called to isn't easy,

but neither is it that complicated.

Read through the Bible, both Old and New Testament,

and we find that God speaks to us,

Jesus teaches us,

Paul reminds us -

clearly, simply, plainly,

what it means to live as a disciple of Christ,

how we can make our lives an offering,

how we can put first things first

as our hearts and treasure meld into one.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah,

God tells us,

*“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; ...
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow...
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.”*

(Isaiah 1:16ff)

We’ve talked the last few weeks about
how Jesus calls us to “Matthew 25” lives:

*feeding the hungry,
clothing the naked,
comforting the sick,
welcoming the stranger,
remembering that what we do to the least
we do to our Lord himself.*

Paul calls us to live by the fruits of the Spirit:
by which he means our lives should radiate:

*“...love, joy,
peace, patience,
kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness,
and self-control”*

(Galatians 5:22)

The great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick,
in a sermon preached almost a century ago said,
“The Christian [life] should [be] ... a symphony
played upon the theme of
the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians...”

You know those words, so familiar:

*“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love,
I am nothing.*

*If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,
but do not have love,
I gain nothing.”*
(1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

That's the life we are called to live,
the life that leads us to lives as offerings to God.
This kind of life is Kingdom life,
life that reflects light,
life that reflects love,
love given us, you and me,
by God through Christ.

For centuries we found it easy to use fear
to call men and women to more godly behavior,
warning that if they slipped,
they'd find themselves on the road to hell,
a road from which there was no turning back.

We took Jesus' many teachings about his return,
his Second Coming,
and turned them from the joyful news Jesus intended—
that joyful news we sing out with such confidence each time
we gather at the Lord's Table: “Christ has died;...
Christ is risen;...
Christ will come again!”
and turned it into frightening news
that if we're not ready
if we're not always on high alert for that day,
that time when Jesus returns,
we'll find the only button available to us
on that elevator we stand before
will be the one that says, “DOWN”

Listen, though, to what Jesus says
in the second part of our gospel lesson:
*“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;
be like those who are waiting
for their master to return from the wedding banquet,
so that they may open the door for him
as soon as he comes and knocks.*
*Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes;
truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt
and have them sit down to eat,
and he will come and serve them.*
If he comes during the middle of the night,

*or near dawn, and finds them so,
 blessed are those slaves.
 But know this: if the owner of the house
 had known at what hour the thief was coming,
 he would not have let his house be broken into.
 You also must be ready,
 for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”*

Yes, Jesus is saying, be alert, be ready
 for that day, that time,
 that time known only to God.
 But still, didn't Jesus begin our lesson by saying,
*“Do not be afraid, little flock,
 for it is your Father's good pleasure
 to give you the kingdom.”*
 And didn't Jesus say that when he comes again,
 he will have us sit at his table
 as he serves us?

We'll be ready, you and I,
 if we work on making our lives an offering;
 if we work at growing in faith, in maturity
 each day.
 We'll be ready not by leaving our ordinary,
 every day, sleeping and eating lives behind.
 but by recognizing that,
 as Frederick Buechner has put it,
 Jesus doesn't call us out of our ordinary lives
 as much as he calls us out of our belief
 that ordinary life is ordinary.

We'll be ready,
 and our lives will be an offering to God
 if we ground our lives in God,
 root our lives in Christ,
 open our lives to the Holy Spirit.

We'll be ready because we'll be changed from the inside out,
 God helping us,
 God bringing out the best in us,
 in our sleeping,
 eating,
 going-to-work,
 and walking-around lives.

AMEN