“Living Sacrifices: Paul’s Greatest Commandment”

Romans 12:1-8

Rev. Rebecca Weaver Longino

First Presbyterian Church, Luling, TX

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“You all want to know the secret formula for getting in, right?” Tina Fey’s character asks this to a group of high school students. In her recent movie *Admission*, Fey plays a Princeton University admissions officer. She travels the country to recruit the nation’s finest and smartest high school students. She is accustomed to being met with eager ears, wanting to know what to put on that application that will grant them admission to that venerable university. A school which only accepts 1% of its applicants.

But the students she encounters at this particular high school don’t give her the response she is used to. She is invited to speak to an alternative school run by a former classmate of hers, played by Paul Rudd. These rather unorthodox students offer rather unorthodox comments. They are skeptical of Princeton. They proclaim that they want to work for world peace. They want to leave the world better than they found it. They don’t see how an Ivy League education will help them with those goals. They would rather march to the beat of their own drums, than conform to the classrooms of an elite school.

Tiny Fey’s character reacts with dismay. You can tell she is offended and does not understand these students. She doesn’t quite know what to do with them. They seem to view the world very differently than she does.

“You all want to know the secret formula for getting in, right?” Theologians, preachers, and evangelists have posed this question for centuries. They ask it of an eager crowd, curious about the kingdom of God. How do you get in? What is that secret formula for being included in the Kingdom of God?

The Church has had various responses to this question throughout the ages. Go to church every week. Give money. Be nice. Don’t do anything unruly. Don’t break any of the commandments. Don’t forget to pray nightly.

We still hold on to this notion that there’s a secret formula for getting into Heaven. Perhaps if we read the Bible cover to cover. Or be applauded for being an upstanding citizen. Somehow these actions will buy our ticket in.

But is it possible to earn entry into the Kingdom of God? Is there a secret formula? Do we have to do a certain thing, or say a certain thing?

Paul is one of the first teachers to address this question in writing, through his letters to various churches. We see him address it in this letter to the Romans. He has just spent chapters 9-11 trying to articulate the answer. Gradually he comes to the conclusion that God loves the people of Israel and God loves the Gentiles who have come to Christ. Ultimately, there is no secret formula for getting into the Kingdom of God. It is up to God’s grace.

Paul declares that there’s no formula for getting in. It isn’t about the food that you eat. Or the rituals you participate in. It isn’t about which church you belong to. It’s about God’s grace. It’s about this gift that is out of our control. It is about God not rejecting anyone. Because all people are created in the image of God. All are God’s children.

As God’s children, we don’t earn that grace which gives entry into the Kingdom of God. But we are called to respond to it. We can’t get away with accepting cheap grace. Grace which calls us to a life of laziness and apathy. Grace which allows us to make excuses. To settle for cheap grace is to refuse to respond with love.

Starting in chapter 12 of Romans, we find insight for the proper response. Paul gives the nitty-gritty ways we live out our faith in response to God’s grace. He helps us understand that we are to live in a certain way in response to grace. In response to God’s invitation into the Kingdom. And he makes it clear that this is no petty task.

“Therefore,” he starts out. Making it clear that everything he has written thus far in the letter leads up to this section. All of it has been building up to what he’s about to say. “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your Spiritual act of worship.

Woah.

Living sacrifices. Paul does not hold back with his words.

To use the term sacrifice, harkens back to the Old Testament when the people gave burnt offerings unto God. They would offer up an animal in worship to God. There were many reasons for this, they are listed in those dry books with all of those laws. Those sacrifices were a big deal. It meant taking something of great value and then setting it on fire. Surrendering it to God. It was a sign of tremendous obedience to offer up a burnt offering, sacrificed to God.

When Paul urges his readers to be living sacrifices, he invokes that same serious notion. That their lives are to be sacrifices for the Gospel. Not martyrs, mind you. Paul isn’t telling Christians to go die on behalf of the cause. He’s saying *living* sacrifices. He’s saying that in response to God’s love, one should dedicate their entire life to God. This means consecrating oneself for the Gospel. Living as though each moment is holy.

He goes on to caution his readers not to conform to the world, rather to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. Constantly seeking out the will of God.

Therefore, if we are to take this seriously, offering ourselves as living sacrifice, it is going to mean veering away from the mainstream. It is going to mean doing the things that might not be popular in the world. To be a living sacrifice means setting ourselves apart from the worldly norms. It means acknowledging that we live in the world, but that we do not conform to the world.

A good question to ask is, are we being thermometers, or thermostats? Thermometers measure the temperature and are controlled by an outside force. When the temperature rises or falls, the thermometer is affected. But thermostats do the changing. They control the climate of a room and make it cooler or warmer. If we are to be living sacrifices, we ought to try and be like a thermostat. Transforming our surroundings by showing what it means to live in Christ.

In this great commandment, Paul sums up everything Jesus teaches. To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. To love our neighbors as ourselves. To take care of those ranked lowest in the world, as though we are caring for Christ himself. To befriend the poor and the outcast. To fight on behalf of the weak and the voiceless. It’s as though Paul takes all of Christ’s teachings and sums them up in this gigantic commandment. Carrying the weight of the Gospel.

To be a living sacrifice, means following Christ’s lead as we walk each day. Realizing that that world is going to look at us funny. The world is likely not going to understand our actions.

Like when we gather for worship every Sunday. We go against the norms of our world, in order to praise our creator. Last week we were reminded of just how countercultural this act is, as we had worship outside on the street corner! The power was out in the building, but you all improvised and set up a worship space outside. We set up our chairs on the sidewalk and let the community see us in worship. People who drove by probably thought we were a bit nuts. I’m sure the guys working on the power pole were giggling at us. But we weren’t going to let the inconvenience of a power outage stop us from offering ourselves in worship to God. We didn’t need the security of these stained glass windows to give our praise to God. The street corner did just fine.

Being a living sacrifice shows when we serve others. Like when we choose to spend half a day serving at the Luling Food bank. Offering our time to serve others, without getting paid. Often without getting thanked by the clients. The world may not understand why we do it. But we don’t serve in order to receive approval from the world. We serve because Christ calls us to. Because Christ says that whenever we serve the least of the world, we serve him. We put our faith into action, we respond to God’s love through loving others. This is being a living sacrifice.

Being a living sacrifice concerns the way we treat others, in general. Whether they are our next door neighbor or someone on the other side of the world. When we respond to each other with love, recognizing that everyone is a child of God, we are living into that call to be a living sacrifice.

I have seen evidence of this in the work of my clergy peers in St. Louis. Last week I spoke at length about the conflict in Ferguson. As we have seen, it continues this week, but with a calmer tone. I think one factor that has changed the tone is the response of various clergy on the scene. They have stood alongside the protesters and listened to their stories. They have recognized that this situation is much bigger than the death of one boy. It stems from generations of racial injustice. It stems from years of being treated like second class citizens as their children are sent to inadequate schools. So many factors play into the protests this week.

As we watch the news of these events, we ought to view it through the lens of love. Seeing each of those protesters as a child of God, in need of being loved and heard. This isn’t the easy route. It’s much easier to look at them as out of control rioters. But if we listen. If we take the time to hear their laments, we’ll see that this is a systemic problem of that we all participate in. Once we realize that, we might see what we can do about working for reconciliation and justice. Doing so is a way of being a living sacrifice. Offering ourselves for that challenging job of furthering Christ’s love in the world.

Being a living sacrifice is no small task. It means working hard at loving and serving others. It means putting our own needs aside and trying to serve the needs of our neighbor.

Back to that question about the secret formula for getting into the Kingdom of Heaven. Outsiders might expect the usual response to that question. Be good, don’t sin, go to church. But what if we respond with a different answer an unorthodox answer that they don’t expect. What would happen if we told them God’s grace is enough? Yet we still strive to be living sacrifices. Doing our best to fulfill that prayer we say every week. Making thy Kingdom come, they will be done. On Earth as it is in Heaven.

May each moment, each word, each action point toward this goal. Of being living sacrifices, making God’s Kingdom of love a reality on earth for every child of God. Amen.