

Aug. 30

WHAT TO DO WHILE WAITING
EIGHTH IN SERIES ON "THE WAY OUT" OF THE HUMAN DILEMMA
ROMANS 12:1-21

Cardinal Cushing, while still a priest, happened on the scene of an accident. Deciding to give the victim last rites, he knelt beside the man and asked, "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?" The man raised his head, looked around at the bystanders, and said, "Here I am dying, and he asks me riddles!" Paul, for all his abstract, theological writing, cannot be accused of writing riddles. Paul's purpose in writing his letters, his purpose in writing theology, was practical: to make changes in the way his readers lived. We have been looking this summer at Paul's interpretation of the gospel, asking what is the way out of the human dilemma, the human situation which is controlled by sin and death. Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, a city and church he had not yet visited, is a glorious answer to this question, and this answer, which abounds in hope, soars in poetry, and sings with joy, is not purely theoretical, abstract or theological. As in Colossians and Ephesians, Paul presents his theology and then makes practical applications.

In Romans, the first eleven chapters are a theological discourse, dealing primarily with the question of the way out of sin. Sin has power: we do not do what we want to do, or know what we ought to do, but we do the very things we don't want to do. We are victims of sin and death. In order to overcome, we must consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God through the power of the Holy Spirit, who leads the way out. For the final triumph of God's act on our behalf through Jesus Christ, we wait. It is not a passive waiting; but a pregnant waiting, like a woman in childbirth. She waits, but she waits actively, cooperating with the birthing process. Paul is confident of God's final triumph. In Romans 8:31-39, the words practically sing by themselves; the paper on which they are written sizzles; triumph exudes from every phrase. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." In chapters 9-11, Paul detours to deal with the Jewish question. He is deeply concerned with the Jews and their relationship to the new church. He has a burden for his fellow Jews, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved." (10:1)

Then, in chapter 12, he has concluded his theological section and is beginning the practical. Having heard the gospel, having seen the way out, what are you going to do about it? Intensely practical, down-to-earth is Paul. Not an academic theologian, not an ivory tower professor, not an irrelevant preacher, Paul is intensely practical and relevant. He begins, "I appeal to you therefore..." The Good News version begins chapter 12 with the words, "So, then..." And to what does the "therefore" refer? To what is the "So, then" referring? Not to the previous phrase, not to the previous sentence, not even to the previous paragraph; no, he is referring to the previous 11 chapters! Through 11 chapters, he has developed his theme meticulously, creatively, poetically, even musically. Then, he says, "Therefore..." Now, what do you do in response, while waiting for God's final triumph?

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12:1, "I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." In Paul's day, prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., the Jews worshipped God, appeased God, attempted to make themselves holy and acceptable to God by making bloody sacrifices at the temple. By the end of a good day, the temple priests were literally up to their waists in the blood of sacrificed animals. Jesus challenged the sacrificial system which probably is the underlying reason he was crucified. Paul continued Jesus' opposition and said the best response to the love of God is to sacrifice, not animals, but yourselves. "Present your bodies," he wrote. If you remember previous sermons, what is translated as "body" does not mean your physical body, but your life; not just your time, money, possessions, service, but your very life, which includes all of the above. Present yourselves as a sacrifice to God, and the best sacrifice is not to lay yourself down on some bloody altar, but to do God's will. Live as God wants you to live.

What Paul is saying here is that God calls you who have responded to the Way Out, you who have heard the gospel, who have experienced the Holy Spirit leading you, guiding you, pulling you; God calls you to model the New Age, model the new life, model the kingdom of God. We who have a glimpse of the Way Out, we who see the light at the end of the tunnel, we are to model that vision on behalf of the world. 12:2, Paul wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed." Don't live in this world captive to sin and death, conformed to its values and ideologies. Don't let the movie stars of Hollywood, or the politicians of Washington, or the advertising manipulators of Madison Fifth Avenue, or the financiers of Wall Street determine your goals, your values and your morality. Be transformed. Live according to the teachings of Jesus. Live as if God has already triumphed and the kingdom has come.

Now, how do you do that? Did you catch what Paul is saying in chapter 12? It's not that clear; he doesn't actually use the word in this chapter as he uses the word in his other letters, but the implication is there, loud and clear for all who have the ears to hear. You are called not only to model the will of God in your own life, but to model it in community with other Christians. You and I are called to be the church; not just to belong to the church, not just to do church work, but to be the church. In verses 3-8, he speaks of the body. We are the body of Christ and as a body has many parts, so each of us has a special, unique part in the church. Now that you have heard the Way Out, model it on behalf of others by participating in the church and doing your part.

12:6-8, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; we who teach, in our teaching; we who exhort, in our exhortation; we who contribute, in liberality; we who give aid, with zeal; we who do acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." You have gifts which God needs in his service. Don't be conformed and hide your light under a bushel, but let it shine. Oh, how the church needs your gifts; oh, how the world needs the church to model how God wants us to live.

What are your unique, special gifts that the rest of us need? A little boy went to school. He was so excited to go to school, nervous, too, but excited. One morning the teacher said, "Today we are going to make a

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cture." "Good," thought the little guy. He liked to make pictures. He could draw lions, tigers and trains and boats. He took out his crayons and began to draw. But the teacher said, "Wait." She waited until everyone looked ready. "Now," she said, "we are going to make flowers." "Good," thought the little boy, "I like to make flowers!" And he began to make beautiful flowers--orange, pink, blue. But the teacher said, "Wait," She went to the blackboard and drew a red flower with a green stem. "There, now you may begin." The little guy looked at the teacher's flower. He liked his better, but he didn't say anything. He just turned the paper over and made a red flower with a green stem. Another day the teacher said, "Today we are going to make something with clay." "Good," thought the little boy, "I can make snakes and elephants and mice," and he began to pinch and pull his clay. But again the teacher said, "Wait. I will show you how." Soon the little boy learned to wait and watch and make things just like the teacher's. And pretty soon he didn't make things of his own anymore.

Then it happened that the little boy and his family moved to another city and the boy went to a new school. On the very first day, the teacher said, "Today we are going to make a picture." The little boy waited for the teacher to tell him what to do. But the teacher didn't say anything; she just walked around the room. When she came to him she said, "Don't you want to make a picture?" "Yes," said the boy, "what are we going to make?" "Well, I don't know until you make it," said the teacher. "How should I make it?" "Why, any way you like!" "And any color?" "Any color," said the teacher, "why, wouldn't it be boring if everyone made the same thing in the same color?" So the little boy made a flower. It was red with a green stem.

I imagine we all have been stifled at some time in our lives. Some of you have been so stifled you doubt whether you have any special, unique gifts. Some teachers stifle creativity. Some parents stifle individuality. Some churches stifle expression; they seem to think Christians should act alike, talk alike, look alike, and smell alike, and all in the carbon copy of either the preacher or the lay leader! Paul says a church is where we share our unique gifts. I like a church where people feel free to share their gifts, act on their dreams, and put their vivid flower in a bouquet with the rest of us, where the orange, purple, pink blossoms display the glory of God. I like it here, where Vaughn and Lennie Davis have taken pity on the bedraggled patio off the lower level, shared their gifts for gardening, cut down a dying tree, weeded, and planted camellias and impatiens. Now we have a colorful, restful patio.

Andrea Zoodsma, a nurse at Stanford Hospital, saw perfectly good medicines being discarded and had a dream how a mission hospital in India could use them. We took an offering for postage, and medicines are still being sent to India. Years ago folks like Bob Medearis had a concern for senior citizen housing. They put their dream and talents to work, and today we have Lytton Gardens, a residence of which we all are proud. Maybelle Swanlund had a gift for library work and a dream of how an exemplary church library might serve. Thanks to Virginia Williams who has continued Maybelle's dream, we have a church library that is the best I have ever seen.

Consider all those in our church who share their mechanical, electrical, computer, and clerical gifts in God's ministry. How about all those who share their gifts of music, cooking, even dishwashing and dusting. I can't name

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everyone, but you get the point. And the further point is that there are multitudes of gifts out there not yet claimed and utilized. Paul lists the gift of prophecy, which is the gift of speaking the word of God, the wisdom of God applied to our present day. "Come forth," you who have the gift of prophecy and share it. Paul lists the gift of teaching. Many of you have the gift of teaching. You like kids and they like you. We need adults who will work with our youth this fall. Who out there has the gift? "Come forth!" Paul lists giving. We all have been blessed with wealth here in America; we all can share our gift of wealth. "Come forth!" We'll call this the Lazarus Campaign! Everyone thought Lazarus was dead, but Jesus went to the tomb and called, "Come forth!" As Lazarus was raised from the dead and restored to life, so there are gifts and talents within you waiting to be called forth, nurtured, trained and used in God's ministry.

In 12:3-8, Paul tells us to share our gifts in the church, as members of the body of Christ. In verses 9-13, Paul lists some of the qualities we are to model within the church in our relationships with one another, qualities that shine like a light in a dark world, pointing to the Way Out. The world stumbles, staggers, and falls trying to find the way out. We see the exit. We see the light. We have had a glimpse of the future. We have the vision. Let's live what we see, practice what we believe. Sacrifice yourself and live God's way: "Love one another with brotherly and sisterly affection; outdo one another in showing honor...Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer...practice hospitality." (12:10-13)

I've barely scratched the surface of how Paul applied his theology, and I haven't even mentioned what might well be the most important and significant act we do together while waiting. Continued next week.