

With Sober Judgement – Romans 12:1-8

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The word “sober” is a word that always seems to get our attention. In our contemporary culture it is used most often as the goal of any addict. To “get sober” is the goal after one concludes that drugs or alcohol have overtaken one’s life. Easier said than done, of course. To claim a life of sobriety takes all of one’s strength and resilience in a culture ripe with temptation to revert to old habits.

Sober, though, is also a word that stands out in scripture. The word comes from the Greek word *sophron*, which means safe, sound in mind, self-controlled, moderate as to opinion or passion, and temperate. And it’s found a total of four times in the New Testament, including here in Romans 12.

And it’s an adjective to describe the mindset we all should take on in our daily living, according to Paul. It’s part of his appeal to his readers to “present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is their spiritual worship.”

And presenting our bodies as living sacrifices is the response, according to Paul in the first half of his letter to the Romans, to God’s goodness in our lives—our redemption in Jesus Christ. Presenting ourselves as living sacrifices is the least we can do in response to God’s favorable treatment of us.

At the end of chapter 11, Paul had reflected on God’s mysterious, fixed purpose and great mercies for all people, both Jew and Gentile (11:30-32). In response, he broke into doxology (11:33-36). But, the letter does not end there. Paul picks up language he had used at the end of chapter 11, calling the audience now to respond to God’s great mercies not in doxology, but with a living sacrifice.

In verse 2 he further defines what presenting one’s body as a living sacrifice means: be transformed by renewing your mind to approve, or discern, God’s perfect will. “Spiritual worship” involves the presentation of the body, accomplished by the renewal of the mind.

And to renew one's mind, according to Paul, one should not think of oneself more highly than one ought to think. Instead, he says in verse 3, think with sober judgement.

Again, that means being of sound mind, being moderate and temperate.

Practically speaking, we might arrive at some reasonable conclusions, then, about ourselves and the communities we are part of.

For example, me employing sober judgment would help me to correctly conclude the following as I come out of my Sabbatical with some new hopes and dreams. Here's what my sober judgment would lead me to conclude:

- I will never work for NASA in any capacity. I'm not qualified. I probably wouldn't even qualify to clean toilets there.
- I will never grow my hair out and wear it in a ponytail in my later years.
- I will never be a stand-up comedian (as much as I might aspire to be on Sunday mornings at 9 and 11).

I've drawn these conclusions, in part, because of my employing sober judgement. I'm keeping it real, as they say, trying to not think of myself more highly than I should.

In all seriousness, sometimes I think we do our young people a disservice when we tell them as youngsters that they can be anything they want to be when they grow up. In our desire to be encouraging and motivating, we try to convince them that any goal or dream is within their reach if they just set their minds to it.

Well, no. Employing a sober mindset might dictate that, instead, we tell our young people that they can achieve anything their gifts and talents will allow. And maximizing those gifts and talents is no easy task either. It takes hard work and discipline to figure out what one's gifts are and then employing them at their maximum level.

Being of sober judgment changes expectations for every area of our lives and grants us an open door which we can walk through to be faithful.

Have you ever heard of something called ultrarealism? I hadn't until I read an article this past week written by Martha Tatarnic (an author and Anglican priest in Ontario, Canada).

Sometimes, she says, we all can "easily undo our own efforts by worrying about what is coming next or wishing that things were different. Ultrarealism instead sees, accepts, and embraces what actually is." Sounds something like exercising sober judgment.

She's a runner. And she says that, while running, she might get freaked-out by her uneven breathing. Or she might feel despair about the spitting rain and how slowly her first mile seems to have gone when she still has several left to run. But while all those things might be true, she says, she can choose to note that, right there in that present moment, her leg muscles feel strong, the rain is refreshing, and she has the great privilege of being able to run. She can feel the discomfort but also recognize that not only is she not dying, and not only is she safe and okay, but she is running and it feels good.

And she then in her piece makes the transition to how the concept of the ultrareal can have powerful implications for the life of the church.

We are an institution that is constantly reminded of our own decline. And so we continue to constantly lament the societal change that has impacted congregations, the nonstop pursuit of a programmatic solution that is going to reverse these trajectories, and a soul-destroying envy toward the versions of Christianity that seem to be so much better at drawing the crowds.

Instead of this mindset, however, the ultrareal church begins by seeing who we really are. The church, according to our sober mindset, is the real, complicated, messy people who have found themselves gathered together and who have been met by the surprising power of God's love. And this reality has implications for us as church members and leaders.

Our jobs are to lift up. To lift up and live the real stories of struggle, mess, heartbreak, and beauty—to help us better see the truth of how God is meeting us right here and right now.

With that in mind, we can then accept and should accept what our particular roles are within the body of Christ.

Coming out of sabbatical, I've been reminded of this stark, but pressure-reducing reality. A sober mindset tells me that there are restrictions to my gifts and talents and my calling is simply to use these for furthering the kingdom.

By God's grace, as I continue to invest my heart and soul in this work, I can participate in something beautiful. And I only need my own gifts and talents—not somebody else's—to do that.

And of course, this is true for all of us as disciples, and it's also true for us as a community. We as a family are called to a particular place and to minister in particular ways that are consistent with our identity as a church. That's where we make our mark; that's where we further the kingdom of God. And our sober judgment will get us there.

Paul reminds us of all this later in this text from chapter 12 when he says, "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function." And later, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us."

Being able to accept this reality only comes by using sober judgment.

What are your individual gifts? Being of sound mind, what honestly are you gifted with? Some of you can work for NASA, we know that. None of you can be stand-up comedians, I know that as well. (Just keeping it real here.)

Be sober-minded about what you can do to most effectively present your bodies as a living sacrifice to the Lord. And then use those gifts to be transformed and to help transform the kingdom of God.

And, to reiterate what I said last week, there are many good things happening within our ministry here at FPC. And that has been enabled by each of us individually and collectively as a congregation "staying in our lane" if you will. We're not trying to be any other church except FPC. According to our own talents, skills, and personality, we are meeting the needs God has placed before us. It's an exciting and rewarding path.

May that sober judgment keep us on that path.