

Discerning Decisions

Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-8

Over the past two decades it seems that the number of decisions we need to make every day have increased. Now maybe it's just that it seems like the world is moving faster that things are constantly changing faster and faster. This pandemic has left us sometimes bewildered sometimes confounded we're never quite sure what to expect to do or not to do. Do we stand at the door, do we wait on a thing on the floor or do we look for hand sanitizer? When do we get to take our masks off and when do we wear them? We've been left with the task of learning new behaviors, setting new boundaries and we look at things from a vastly different perspective. It felt like the world came to a complete stop back in March and over the past few months I kind of feel like the earth has started to spin again started to rotate slowly and slowly getting faster and picking up steam. And now it feels like it's going fast and almost out of control and we're faced with some difficult choices. How do we weigh one's personal health with one's mental health and wellness? Where is the balance in these decisions and what will help us make these difficult decisions?

Now Paul in the passage of Romans is inviting faithful followers to be a living sacrifice. We are not in this moment being asked by Paul to pick up our cross and walk towards death but rather we are being called to use our bodies, our minds, and our spirits to act on God's will. So how do we know what we're called to do? God and our faith have given us some tools to do this. We do this through deep listening, through discerning together with one another, listening for where the spirit is at work in our lives and in this world. We do this by worshiping God and when we worship God we are reminded of what we value, what God calls us to do and be and then we also live out our faith in the world in the best way we can by caring for others and by working towards being in right relationship. Paul is challenging faithful followers of Christ today to move outside the norms of societal behavior to take risks that align with the will of God to make bold decisions like the pharaoh's daughter, the midwives and Moses' mother. Remember that in the time that Paul wrote this was the early Christian community and it faced many challenges. There was a lot at stake and his statement captures a bit of this when he said, 'I appeal to you therefore to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. These words can be difficult for us to hear. The word sacrifice today is often associated with something negative, it is often associated with something that leads to death or severe injury; when somebody sacrifices themselves for someone else in war, in crisis. Sometimes we

put ourselves in front of others because we know we have the strength to make the change, to help the person that we were standing before.

Rochelle's Stockhouse suggests that "Paul ties bodily living sacrifice to discerning and living into the will of God. Paul indicates that this may mean we actually need to do things that will put us outside the norms of behavior of our society, wrapping our minds around what we do day to day in our lives that express God's will, not our personal will but God's will."¹ The story of baby Moses and the actions of the women in it are perfect example of how God may call on us to bend the rules even break them at times. First in the story from Exodus we hear how the midwives did not do what Pharaoh asked. They somehow kept missing the birth of the Hebrew women's children. Now they tell the Pharaoh that, so you know these Hebrew women are just so strong and vigorous and thus we don't make it in time when they give birth. This is probably one of the first lies that was said. And then there's Moses's mom and sister who conceal this baby boy from the Egyptians so that he will not be killed. They do this for as long as they possibly can and then when it's too much, they put him in a basket send him down the river. And once again the rules are broken the women are acting as living sacrifices, not to be conformed to the wishes of mortals or kings. And then the Pharaoh's own daughter also breaks the rules and protects this baby boy when she discovers him on the river as she is bathing. She then makes an even bolder move and provides Moses' mom, which was probably clear to her who the mom was, provides her with the opportunity to continue to care for her son until he is of age. And at the point when he comes of age Pharaoh's daughter, the princess, adopts this child as her own and names him Moses and then the Hebrew boy is then raised in the palace of the man who wanted to kill him, the man who was afraid that if the Hebrew people grew in number that they would outnumber him, it would threaten his authority and his kingship. All these women acted out of love, they acted on what they thought was right and they acted according to God's will. They discerned that what God would want them to do in those moments was to act boldly, to break the rules and to do what was right. They put themselves in harm's way, they were truly a living sacrifice. They used their bodies, presented their bodies as a living sacrifice for God which was holy and acceptable.

I want to go back to all and the words from Romans, but I want to have you hear those words again from a different voice. This is a different version of the Bible; from *The Message* and this is what it says, "So here's what I want you to do with God helping you. Take everyday, ordinary life; you're eating, your sleeping, going to work, walking around and place it before God as an offering. Embrace what God does for you and the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out readily recognizing what God wants you and quickly responding to it and 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. Fix

¹ Rochelle Stackhouse, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 374-376.

your attention on God you'll be changed from the inside out. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by it the living sacrifice. Live out your faith in the world.”² Today's scriptures emphasize how God truly is active in our lives, that God's mercy isn't simply reactive. For example, when something bad happens we don't just call out to God and God fixes it. God's mercy is proactive it's there from the very beginning. It was there before Moses was even born in the actions of those women, the midwives who refused to do what the Pharaoh had asked.

For instance, we are all being called to transform, and this isn't something that we do but rather it is something that God does. God is the agent of change. These scriptures helped to remind us of the purpose of the church. The first thing we must recognize is that the church belongs to and owes its existence to God and not to us. God has created and claimed the church for God's purposes. The Exodus story describes the church as the people of God. That's the image that is used in the Old Testament. God covenanted with the people and “the people of God are called to be faithful to this creating, redeeming, sustaining God.”³ The people of God are called to serve God and serve this world. Paul uses a slightly different image of the church he sees the church as the body of Christ. Paul names that “just as the parts of the body need one another so the individuals who make up the church need one another; none are sufficient unto or by themselves. Moreover, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Together the church, its members and individuals have an identity greater than any one person or group of people; together it is the body of Christ.”⁴ We the people, we the faithful followers of Christ, we the church; we are called to live out our faith and be a living sacrifice. What we do now in the present is what matters and will continue to matter. We are the body of Christ and what I love about that image is that there's no I in team man there is no I in the body of Christ. We're all in this together, we all have a part to play and that lightens the load for each one of us. The responsibility is collective not individual. And being faithful followers of Christ as we can see can be incredibly challenging. Especially when it means that we must make hard decisions and sometimes put ourselves in harms way or when we feel compelled to take the risk and have an open honest awkward hard conversation. Being a faithful follower of Christ though can also be simple and easy because we are not alone God is always there with us and we have each other. We are not solely responsible. So as part of the body of Christ working in concert with one another and God through the power of the Holy Spirit we work together for justice and peace in this world. With God's help we will be transformed. With God's help we will be forgiven and find a way to forgive one another for past hurts. With God's help we will work towards reconciliation for the part that we played in damaging our world, ourselves, and each other. And with God's help we will answer the call to protect the vulnerable and work with God for the healing of the world so that all may have abundant life.

² The Bible, The Message.

³ Anthony B. Robinson, *What's Theology got to do with it? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church*. (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006), p. 160.

⁴ _____, p. 161.

Making bold decisions, not conforming to this world and being a living sacrifice requires us to practice discernment, to look beyond self and to listen for the still small voice of God working in and through and amongst each one of us. We are being invited by Paul; we're being reminded by the actions of the women in Exodus to practice discernment. To invite God to be part of our reflection as a collective, part of the dialogue we have and engaging people in the community at large. We need to trust that the spirit is at work guiding us and leading us on the right path. So how will you go out this week and make bold decisions, discerning decisions and present yourself as a living sacrifice to God, holy and acceptable knowing that you are loved and that we the church are part of this great creation and kingdom of God. So, go out in the world and be bold thanks by to God. Amen.