

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138;  
Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I was on a little trip earlier this summer. I went to India for a bit. And while in India, I learned a few things. Let me share some of them with you.

I learned that clean underwear is a precious luxury.

I learned that hot is relative. When you've grown up most of your life where it is 95 degrees in the shade – that's not hot. The corollary to that is cold is relative. When you've grown up where it's 95 degrees in the shade and it cools down to 72 degrees in the shade, while some of us might be rejoicing in that, others are wearing sweaters and wool hats.

I learned that I need to drink a lot of water.

At the risk of perhaps sounding too much like toilet humor, I learned that solid poop is a very good thing. (For those of you who have traveled, you know what I mean.)

Some days, it's just too dog gone hot to do anything.

I learned that a Swiss Army knife is a wonderful tool.

I learned that you need to take your sandals off before you enter a house, because the streets are so filthy and you don't want to go tracking all of that gunk all throughout the house.

I learned that four weeks is far too long to be away from my family.

And I was reminded, once again, that working together I can accomplish a whole lot more than working by myself. I was reminded of that in Bapatla, India. I was reminded of that as well, in Paul's letter to the Romans.

While we were in India we spent most of our time at an orphanage, or as they call it, a "youth hostel". There were two campuses: the girls' dormitory and about a mile away; the boys' dormitory at the school. While we were there we were able to accomplish many things, most of which happened at the girls dorm. We were able to paint both the interior and the exterior of the girls' dorm. We repaired the shutters at the girls' dorm. ("Why do you need shutters?" we asked. "For when it gets cold," we were told.) We installed additional lighting and fans at both sites. At the girls' dorm, we installed another sewage holding tank. We were able to purchase all of the books and most of the supplies for the 350 students and teachers for the entire year. And perhaps the thing we most appreciated was that while we were at the girls dorm, we were able to raise the chimneys above the roof line (it had previously stopped about half way up the second floor, and so all of the smoke would go into the rooms where the girls slept); we were able to raise the chimneys so the smoke would fly away, where it was supposed to.

There were some other things, too, that we weren't able to accomplish while we were there, but hopefully have raised enough money that they can accomplish those things on their own; those things include: upgrading their electricity to three phase; being able to purchase three metal storage lockers; and for all

of the students, metal foot lockers (they have to be metal in order to be rat proof). We also have, hopefully, raised enough money to install lighting at the school courtyard.

Some of these things we were able to accomplish with our own hands: much of the painting; and the window repair (which was done with that little Swiss Army knife). Much of the stuff, though, we had to hire out: the electrical stuff; some of the exterior painting; and, most definitely, extending the chimney. We (the group I was with) did not possess the skills, we did not have that kind of knowledge, and we certainly did not have the tools. But other people in that community did have the knowledge, the skills, the tools. There were others who could do those tasks. But we had to ask them.

As Paul writes to the congregations in Rome, he realizes that part of their problem is that they had far too many (we could say) cooks in the kitchens, way too many managers on the floor. Lots of people to give orders, but not a whole lot to follow through with the work. In this passage that we heard this morning, which started in Chapter 12, begins the third main section in Paul's letter to the Romans. In this section, he's trying to talk about the behaviors and attitudes that are appropriate for a community of faith.

He starts off, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters". He begins by asking them for their help in the matter (a matter of their own devising, but he's asking for their help anyway). He had to purposely ask them. Then he says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God". Did you catch that? Let me read it again, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God". Present your bodies – plural, as a living sacrifice – singular. He's kind of subtle, but he's trying to get across the point to the Romans: "we" have to work together.

Why do we need to do this? "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" and then he goes on to list many different gifts. We all do different things. We are all skilled at something else. And that's a good thing; we are not all the same. We do not all do exactly the same things. We have electricians and masons and plumbers. We need electricians and masons and plumbers because we are not, all of us, electricians and masons and plumbers. We need teachers and medical personnel. We need government workers and accountants and secretaries and custodial aids because all of us – all of us – are called to work together for the good of God.

At the earlier service we welcomed into our family Hayley and Xavier. We need to realize that they too will eventually be part and offer their gifts to us. But until then, we need to offer our gifts to them. They need the church – they need us to serve as witnesses and teachers and guides so that they might learn God's love and grow in faith.

Now in all of this, Paul never says that we have to be bosom buddies. Paul never says that we have to be best of friends. After living for four weeks in close proximity with sixteen other people, there were times when I really needed my alone time. We don't always have to get along, because we won't always get along, because we're humans and we mess up. But God doesn't say that. Paul's not saying that. We don't have to be friends, but we do have to work together.

As we were working one of the last days there at the girls dorm, as we were trying to clean up all of the paint spatter from the floors and get things rearranged for the girls, one of the fellows with us, Nick, came across one of the old student handbooks. (Let me add an aside, where we were in the region of Andhra Pradesh in Bapatla, India, the native tongue is Telugu; the national language is Hindi, and by the time these kids are in fifth grade, they can read and write Telugu and Hindi and English. By the time they are in fifth grade, they are tri-lingual.) But there in their "English Workbook for Class VI," Nick stumbled upon this and he shared it with me. This is called the Indian Pledge: "India is my country, and all Indians are my brothers and sisters. I love my country, and I am proud of its rich and varied heritage. I shall always

strive to be worthy of it. I shall give my parents, teachers, and all elders respect, and treat everyone with courtesy. To my country and my people, I pledge my devotion. In their well-being and prosperity alone lies my happiness." Whether they realize it or not, whether intentionally or not, the government is calling the people live together to work out God's will.

That's what Paul exhorts the Romans to do – work together for God's will. That's what Paul exhorts us, today, to do. That's what our Churchwide Assembly asked us to do a couple of weeks ago as they met in Orlando – work together. We don't have to be friends. We don't have to be bosom buddies. But we are all called by the waters of our baptism; we are all called by the bread and wine that we will share; we are all called to work together for the good of God. We (plural) are called to be a (singular) living sacrifice, to strive to work, to lead forth in ministry, the ministry of God, in all that we do.

Amen.