

And so it comes down to this...

Romans 12:1-8

Our family is used to taking long road trips. We know the road between here and Windsor like the back of our hands. We have made the trek to Florida, twice. Over March Break this year, we travelled to Chicago. Everyone asked us how long the flight was, but why fly when you can drive 10 hours through a spring snow storm? But there's one road trip we look forward to every year. Its 18 hours door to door, including stops along the way, which are few and far between. It's a long drive. And there are always a few challenges. Sometimes we are stopped for construction. Sometimes the car breaks down. Sometimes we have forgotten cash for the toll roads. We have never run out of diesel, yet. It takes a level of endurance to get from start to finish. Its dark when we leave the house. The streets are quiet but as we head south the traffic increases as do the number of highway lanes. The street lights switch off. The traffic increases. The number of highway lanes are reduced. The radio stations fade out. Our eyes get heavy. We change drivers. The traffic decreases. The street lights come on. But there is one spot along the way, at the 17 hour mark, which always gives us a little mental and emotional lift and encourages us to keep going. It's a sign on the side of the road with just four words, but it helps put the entire journey into perspective. "Welcome to Nova Scotia." Everything that has come in the previous 17 hours has led us to this point.

Everything that has come in the previous 11 chapters has led us to this point. We have been on the Roman Road for 19 weeks now. And it takes a level of endurance to get this far. Because, it hasn't always been an easy journey. The readings are deep and difficult. The subject matter has been challenging. Even some of the language is unfamiliar to us. And just when we are at the point of crying out, like kids from the backseat, "how much longer?" Paul's writes one word, just one word, and it gives us the little mental and emotional lift we need to keep going. That word? Therefore. Who knew that the simple word, therefore, could be so powerful? But that one word, and we could simplify it even further by substituting the word, so, that one little word marks an important turning point in Paul's letter to the Romans. Because with that one little word, Paul turns from his deep, complex, profound, theological arguments to the very practical, very down to earth everyday life of Christian believers like you and I. The "therefore", or "so" which marks the beginning of Chapter 12, signals a summing up of all that has come before it. It's as if Paul is says, with all of what I have just said in mind; the teaching on sin, on the law, on God's righteousness judgment, on God's faithfulness, the sacrifice of Christ, the gift of God's grace and mercy: with all that in mind, here is what to do with that information. Chapter 12 is the "let's get down to business" chapter. And chapters 13-15 are examples of what getting down to business, what responding to the grace of God looks like in real life. Even chapter 16, a list of all those friends and supporters

who Paul wants to thank personally, often include details about their relationship to Paul or their role in supporting the work of the church. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

So, with all that in mind, armed with everything we now know about what God has done for sinners like us through the love and mercy of Jesus, having understood the reason for living a Christian life, Paul invites us to stop thinking about it, stop rationalizing it, stop talking about it and just do it. Easier said than done. Paul summarizes the Christian life in the first two verses.ⁱ Our response to all that we have heard, all that we have come to know, all that in faith we believe about Christ begins with offering our whole selves to him. Paul's language here may seem extreme to us: to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. It reflects what Jesus himself told us "whoever wants to be my disciple, they must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me." It is important that we recall the context Paul was first addressing. He is writing to the believers in the church in Rome which is made up of both Jewish and Gentile (or non Jewish) converts. Paul himself converted to Christianity from a Jewish heritage. And so he and the Jewish converts would have been very familiar with the sacrificial system which was central to the Jewish faith. Two types of sacrificial offeringsⁱⁱ were made: the first was a sin offering which involved the spilling of the blood of an animal to atone or reconcile for sins committed. The second kind of offering was a burnt offering in which the very best animal from among your flock or herd, an animal without defect, was offered. It was burnt so that there was nothing left. The burnt offering represented giving all you had, the best of yourself, entirely, wholly to God. As New Testament people, we understand that the blood of Jesus became for each of us, the once and for all sin offering. He was our sacrifice. But Paul invites us to consider our lives as a living sacrifice, not unlike the burnt offering, to devote our whole lives to Christ, nothing held back. In the Christian life, there is no dipping your toe in to see how it feels, no trying it on before you decide. There is no half-way. I love the way that Eugene Petersen interprets the understanding of offering ourselves as living sacrifices when he writes: take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to work and walking around life and place it before God as an offering.ⁱⁱⁱ This is where our faith is tested – all those things we say we believe about God - it is tested in the heat of our daily living. We aren't just offering to God our Sunday best, this one hour when we clean ourselves up and put on our best behavior. We are giving all of ourselves to Him, nothing held back. Who I am at work, who I am at home, who I am when I am out with friends, who I am online, who I am in my marriage, who I am driving on the 401, who I am when I think no one is looking. Paul says these are our acts of worship. I have to ask myself, are these acts of worship in my life? Am I even aware of the fact that as I am living my life, I am living the whole and the parts of it in such a way, that my life is offered to God as an act of worship? The word as it comes to us in our Bibles this morning is usually translated as spiritual, as in this is your spiritual act of worship but most Biblical scholars are in agreement that a more accurate translation is actually, logical. These are your logical acts of worship. It makes sense. Giving ourselves wholly, whole heartedly to God reflects what he has already done for us in Jesus. Withholding ourselves, holding ourselves back, hoarding or hiding a part of ourselves, making a half hearted offering of our lives is not an offering worthy of the One who gave it all.

How do we offer our whole selves as acts of worship to God? By consciously choosing to free my mind to allow God to do the work of transformation. Paul writes: Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. Conform – form with. Formed in accordance or agreement with. Not to conform any longer to the world’s pattern - that’s a challenge. It is a challenge to swim upstream. It is so much easier just to go with the flow, to fit in. In fact, conformation is a part of the human nature. Generally, we don’t want to stand out from the crowd. We would rather just blend. And so we follow along, often without even thinking about it. Our language, our behaviours, our attitudes, our actions, even our thoughts all falling in line with the dominant patterns of our culture. But Paul calls us to be transformed – transformed from what the world, the culture tells us to be into what Christ invites us to become. The word transformed literally is metamorphosis – not simply putting on a new outfit and getting a fresh haircut, not just layering Christian lingo on top of our deeply engrained cultural values but a complete change – a re-formation; to stop following the pattern given to us by the culture and to begin following the pattern given to us by Christ. Paul rephrases this idea of transformation or metamorphosis in his letter to the Galatians where he writes: if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come. It begins with our minds: consciously choosing to be formed in Christ, by Christ and allowing Him to renew us from the inside out. The mind is our command central: it regulates our thinking, our speaking, our acting. The only way for us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God as acts of worship is to first be transformed by the renewing of our minds for Christ. Instead of mindlessly conforming to the pattern of the culture, we can mindfully, intentionally, purposefully break free from the chains and the expectations and norms and the trends that hold us captive and live for and with Christ. Living our whole lives in this way has a profound affect on the world around us.

Recently, I discovered the Home Renovation show, FixerUpper, which features husband and wife duo, Chip and Joanna Gaines. Chip is the brawn, the contractor who does the heavy lifting. Joanna is the design mind, who sees beyond the limits of what is and envisions what could be. Joanna is all business, sweet but serious. Chip, on the other hand, is the comic relief and maybe a poster child for ADHD. They take homes which need more than just a facelift and give them new life. The transformation happens when the old is demolished to make way for the new. Garbage is removed, walls are torn down, openings are made for light to stream into dark places, the interior is completely unrecognizable from its former state. And even the exterior looks different as a result. And could it be what we have come to refer to as God incidence that Chip and Joanna are Christians? I tell you this because a few days ago, Chip and Joanna Gaines attended a U2 concert in Dallas, Texas where the band stopped on the North America leg of their 30th Anniversary tour of the Joshua Tree Album. Christian author, Ann Voskamp and her daughter attended the same concert and they met the Gaines for the first time. There they are: the four guys from U2 – arguably one of the biggest rock bands in the world, Chip and Joanna Gaines whose little home reno show has weekly viewers in the millions, and Voskamp whose little book sat on the New York Times Best Seller list for 60 weeks – 7 people, 7 lights in a sea of 40,000 concert go-

ers. Voskamp reflecting on the event, waxed poetic not just about the spectacle of U2 who confront culture unashamedly with the gospel in much of their music, but she also recognized something deeper taking place in the renovation work, the renewal work of Chip and Joanna Gaines. Voskamp writes: “Yeah, there are movers & shakers & makers & creatives & poets & prophets & mothers & fathers & believers, with hammers & guitars & pens & a thousand different tools in hand, who are part of the Kingdom coming & the remaking of the world & this is no small thing but the most beautiful thing that all of us get to do together, each of us renewing culture by renewing the canvas of our minds. The world is changed by people who change the way they see their world.”^{iv}

I want to be sure you hear the point Voskamp is making: when we live as transformed people, as new creations in Christ, God uses us to continue His work of transforming the culture around us. Or as Sharon’s friend Loreli Cockram, would say, “Free people free people.”^v

So, it comes down to this. In response to God’s love and mercy, offer your life, your everyday life, the whole and the parts, broken and crumbling as your worship. And the God who formed you from the dust of the earth, will transform you and use you for His glory and for the coming of his Kingdom.

ⁱ Tim Keller, Romans 8-16 For You

ⁱⁱ With help from Tim Keller, Romans 8-16 For You

ⁱⁱⁱ Eugene Petersen, The Message, Romans 12:1

^{iv} Ann Voskamp, Instagram, May 28, 2017

^v Loreli Cockram – not sure if this original to Loreli but its where I heard it first!