

Sacrificial worship: Romans 12:9-21

by [Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

Like an artist sketching in broad strokes on a huge canvas, Paul in the first 11 chapters of Romans has traced with great intensity God's patience and persistence at making peace with humanity. The strokes get broader, the colors ever more vivid, until Paul is himself overcome at what he sees. He steps back, exhilarated at how even his attempt to trace the ways of God falls far short of the inventiveness and unpredictability of God's grace, and he breaks into doxology (11:33-36). All he or any of us can do in response to such grace is to worship.

What kind of worship? Because of God's mercies, the only worship that makes sense (*logikhn* is inexplicably translated as "spiritual" by the NRSV and NIV) is, in Paul's view, to offer our very lives, our bodies—our physical being, our imagination, our skills, our possessions—as a "living sacrifice." Such sacrificial worship is finally not a matter of obligation, but of gratitude and freedom. That is why in the following verses, including those assigned in this week's lectionary, we find not a set of rules but something like a locker-room pep talk: a grab bag of motivational prods, pushes and invitations.

I played soccer in college for one season, and I wasn't very good. (Forty-five years later I still remember blowing the one chance I had to score.) But I know that what a coach does before a game is to put some wind in the sails of the players. Tone matters as much as anything. A good coach wants to motivate, energize, pump up the team, make the players hungry to play well with joy rather than out of obligation and fear. That is what Paul is up to here. He wants his readers to remember who they are and what and (especially) who got them where they are—who the Source of their strength is.

Not surprisingly, this pep talk to the "body in Christ" (12:5; not a bad name for a team!) is full of energy. For example, in verse 8, Paul speaks of practicing mercy "with hilarity" (or "cheerfulness" in many translations). Maybe *hilarious* was used a little differently in Paul's day, but it clearly suggests a joyful and ungrudging offer of mercy. Baffling attitude, don't you think?

That passion infuses the following verses too. Verse 9: Don't just be critical of evil, hate it! Hate violence, poverty, sexism and greed. Hate callousness toward the environment. But don't just hate. *Hold fast* to the good. This is hardly an ordinary "being good." Paul's choice of language evokes the way a man and woman hold fast to each other.

Verse 10: Be fiercely competitive at honoring each other. No room here for limelight-hogging stars. Think of it as a special honor to hang out with those who are not flashy, who are on a losing streak, who, like me, flubbed their one chance at scoring, who would normally be thought of as an embarrassment to the team. As Paul says in another letter: "Not many of you were wise by human standards, . . . powerful, . . . of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26). That stock theme in Disney sports movies of losers and misfits being forged together into an unlikely winning team owes something to Paul. If in our day this theme is in some tension with a star system in sports and much of the arena of our common life, it was even more out of step with Roman imperial status-seeking in Paul's day.

The energy in the language seems to flag somewhat in verse 13, where the NRSV has the phrase "extend hospitality to strangers." That is not the way a coach talks at halftime, and it is not how Paul would have been heard. For one thing, "extend" or "practice" (NIV) does not begin to capture the force of the verb *diwkontes*, translated in verse 14 as "persecute": "Bless those who persecute you!" Further, the term behind "hospitality" is *philoxenia* ("love of strangers"). We know well the term *xenophobia* ("fear of strangers"). Regrettably, *philoxenia* has not made its way into our vocabulary.

Verses 13 and 14 thus contain a delicious play on words. Back to our sports analogy: not only am I to invoke the very best for those who are pursuing me in order to take me out of the game, I am with equal tenacity to pursue them with love. Think of what preoccupies us today: elections, "illegal aliens," terrorists, war. What would happen if those who had experienced God's loving pursuit of strangers, sinners and enemies (Rom. 5) were to pursue strangers, aliens and the hostile "other" with precisely such sly and persistent love? We recall the pioneer of this counterintuitive way of playing the game: When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other. If members of Christ's body do their job, they can add a rather strange beatitude to blessed are the peacemakers and the persecuted: "Blessed are the persecutors!"

Oh, and leave the penalties to the Chief Referee (v. 19). Remember, that Ump is the very one who modeled this subversive way of playing and winning to begin with.

In these verses Paul asks his team to go out there and subvert the game and surprise the opposition by not hogging the ball, by refusing to retaliate—indeed, by helping out the opposition. Sounds like an order from the coach to throw the game. Not so. That's how you win! You never know—you might change the way the game is played, and you might have opponents wanting to join your crazy team.