

IF A TREE FALLS IN THE WOODS
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Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 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 one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

If a tree falls in the woods, and no one's around to hear it, does it make a sound? The common sense answer to that question is yes, of course, a falling tree is going to make a huge sound whether someone's there to hear it or not. Because, we assume, the world exists apart from us. It has its own being that doesn't change just because we're not there to observe it. It sounds the same, looks the same, smells the same, feels the same, is the same, independent of you and me.

But is that assumption true? Think about what sound actually is.

When a tree falls, it creates vibrations that travel through the air, go into our ear and stimulate the inner ear. That stimulation is then converted into an electrical signal that travels down the auditory nerve to the brain, which interprets it as a loud crash. So

really, sound is just a matter of perception. It's literally all in our minds.

All of which is to say that sometimes what we take to be "reality" is just an appearance—the way things seem on the surface. While the real reality—the way things actually are—is kind of buried beneath the surface. So in order to see it, we have to really dig down. We have to go beyond what our eyes and ears tell us and question sometimes even our most basic assumptions about how the world works. Which isn't easy. It takes a lot of effort and imagination. But the reward is a life that's open to surprise and wonder, a life that leads us into larger truths about who we are and what we're about.

That's what both readings today are about. They're both urging us to dig down and discover a larger truth that's not easily recognized.

In the reading from Romans, Paul is trying to get his audience to see the real reality of their unity in Christ, which at the moment is buried under a surface reality of conflict and division. In the early to middle part of the first century, leading up to when this letter was written, it's too early to talk about Christianity as a separate religion. What you had was a religious movement focused on Jesus that was still part of Judaism; and followers of that movement who still considered themselves Jews. And what these folks were doing was spreading the gospel from one synagogue to the next, which created tension between them and the rest of the people in those communities, who were still Jewish in the traditional sense.

Over time that tension built up until finally, in Rome, in the year 49, it erupted in open conflict, at which point, the emperor Claudius stepped in. He closed all the synagogues in the city and expelled all the Jews, including the ones who were part of this new movement. So now the only followers of Jesus left were Gentiles who'd received the gospel and converted. And with no one else around, they took over the community, and started meeting in one another's homes. And this went on for five years, until a new emperor came to power and allowed all the Jews to return.

That's when things started getting ugly. The Gentile Christians had gotten pretty used to being in charge and practicing their faith the way they wanted. But now all of a sudden their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters were back and trying to tell them what to do.

So that's the situation Paul's addressing in this letter—a deeply divided church—and in this particular passage he's trying to restore a sense of unity among the Romans by telling them to be "transformed by the renewing of [their] minds"—which meant something very specific. The word "mind" is a pretty general term today. But in Paul's day it referred to the ability to see the true nature of something beyond appearances. So what Paul is saying to his audience is: Look beyond your superficial differences and recognize that deep down the larger truth is you're all members of one body—the body of Christ—and you all have important roles to play, Jews and Gentiles alike.

In the gospel reading, Jesus is doing the same basic thing—pointing people to a larger truth that's not easily recognized—but the situation is

different. One day as they're walking along, he asks the disciples who they think he is, and Peter says, "You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus looks at him and says, "Good job, Peter. You're going to be the foundation of my church—the community that's going to bear my name and carry on my ministry."

Then he makes two statements that are kind of hard to understand.

First he says the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church, which people often take to mean that evil forces may try to attack the church, but they'll never be able to defeat it. But when you think about it, a gate isn't something you use to attack; it's something you use to defend. So what he's really saying is, it's the church that's playing offense and the powers lined up against it that are playing defense, and inevitably the church is going to win, even though it doesn't always seem like that to us.

After that Jesus tells the disciples, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." And we often zip right past this because we don't know what it means. But it has to do with the Jewish law and how it relates to Jesus' followers. To bind something is to say, "This part of the law still applies to us, as followers of Jesus." To loose something is to say, "This part of the law we don't have to worry about anymore."

So Jesus is giving the disciples the authority to make those decisions; and the way it reads in English, it sounds like what they do here on earth will then happen in heaven. But in the original language it's actually the other way around: what they do here on earth will already have happened in heaven. It's a little confusing, but basically Jesus is trying to get Peter to see the larger truth that the divine reality determines the human reality. God's life unfolds in our lives. What happens up there sets in motion what happens down here.

Now, all of this is a lot to take in, but it all goes back to the idea that sometimes what we take to be "reality" is just an appearance—the way things seem on the surface. While the real reality—the way things actually are—is kind of buried beneath the surface. So in order to see it, we have to really dig down. We have to go beyond what our eyes and ears tell us and question sometimes even our most basic assumptions about how the world works.

That was an important message for Jesus' followers back in the earliest days of the church, and it's still an important message for Jesus' followers today. It's something we really need to hear.

We often look at the church today and see nothing but division—church members arguing and fighting, congregations splitting. But that's only the surface, Paul says. The real reality is that we're all one in Christ, and we're all part of each other.

We often worry about the future of the church. We feel like we're becoming less and less relevant. We feel like we're at odds with the culture around us. We feel like we're struggling just to survive. But that's only the surface, Jesus says. The real reality is that God is actively involved in shaping the life of the world, and there's nothing in the world that can resist God's will.

And granted, it's not easy to see those realities. It takes a lot of effort and imagination. But the reward is a life that's open to surprise and wonder, a life that leads us into larger truths about who we are and what we're about. Amen.