

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

August 23, 2026 – PENTECOST 13 / PROPER 16A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Living Sacrifices—Many Gifts*”

Isaiah 51:1-6	(God's salvation is eternal; He will comfort Zion)
Psalms 138	(Give thanks to the Lord; His love endures forever)
Romans 12:1-8	(We are to present our bodies to God as living sacrifices)
St. Matthew 16:13-20	(Jesus asks whom people think He is. Answer: The Messiah!)

There is a moment in the Rite I Eucharistic liturgy that can pass so quickly we hardly notice it. As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table to receive His Presence in the Bread and Wine, the priest prays on our behalf, “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee,” echoing down the centuries what St. Paul is teaching us in today's Epistle: “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.”

This is a striking phrase—especially for those of us who are accustomed to thinking of a sacrifice as something that is finished: something given up, surrendered, which costs us something and then is over. But St. Paul and our Eucharistic liturgy speak of a *living* sacrifice, not a sacrifice offered once and completed, but a life *continually* offered to, sacrificed to, God.

Notice where Paul begins. He doesn't say, “Try harder,” or “Become more religious.” He doesn't advise us to “Earn God's approval.” He says, “by the mercies of God.” Everything begins with, and is sustained by, the mercy of God. So far, St. Paul has spent eleven chapters in Romans telling us what God has done for us in Christ—how God's grace and mercy have reached us, forgiven us, reconciled us, and made us new people. Now, Paul says, in response to that mercy, offer yourselves to God. The order matters: We don't offer ourselves *so that* God will love us. We offer ourselves because *God already* loves us.

Offering ourselves to God means that we give God the totality of our everyday lives—our thoughts, words, deeds, and plans. But Paul isn't asking us to give God only our minds. He says, “Present your *bodies*.” In biblical language, the ‘body’ connotes *the whole embodied person*: our hands and feet, our voices and faces, our work and our relationships, our time and our habits, our presence in the world. Christian faith is not merely something we believe, it is how we *live*. Our faith becomes visible in what we do with our hands, what we say with our mouths, how we treat the person who irritates us, how we respond when someone is hurting, how we spend our money, how we use our influence, how we behave when no one is watching. The great spiritual question is not simply, “What do I believe?” But “What does *my life* say about what I believe?”

Paul then makes an important distinction. “Do not be conformed to this world,” he says, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” The difference between *conforming* and *transforming* is important. *Conforming* means allowing the world around us to tell us who we are and what matters. It happens gradually. We absorb the assumptions of our culture almost without realizing it: What makes a person successful. What makes someone valuable. Whom we should fear. Whom we should distrust. What we should desire. How much is enough. What we should think about people who disagree with us. We don't have to make a conscious decision to conform. If we're not careful, we simply drift into it. Whereas, *transformation* means allowing God to reshape our vision, our thoughts, opinions, and feelings, so that we begin to see ourselves, other people, and the world through the eyes of Christ. And that transformation is not merely intellectual. It changes the way we actually live, day to day.

So, what does that look like? Paul explains: “God in his kindness gave each of us different gifts. If your gift is speaking what God has revealed, make sure what you say agrees with the Christian faith. If your gift is serving, then devote yourself to serving. If it is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. If it is encouraging others, devote yourself to giving encouragement. If it is sharing, be generous. If it is leadership, lead enthusiastically. If it is helping people in need, help them cheerfully” (12:6-8, GWT).

The good news is that God has given us such a wide diversity of gifts such that we are not supposed to be a congregation all trying to become the same kind of Christians or do the same work or ministry here at St. John's.

Imagine an orchestra rehearsing. The violinist cannot say, "The trumpet gets the dramatic parts, so perhaps I should play trumpet." The percussionist cannot decide the cello is more important. Each instrument has a different voice, and the music depends upon their wonderful differences. Just so, the church isn't meant to sound like one instrument. The person who teaches, the person who encourages, the person who organizes, the person who quietly visits the sick, and the person who gives generously, are all contributing something different to the same work of God. The Lord does not ask us to become someone we are not, but to discover what He has entrusted to us and then use it faithfully. A violin does not glorify God by wishing it were a trumpet. It glorifies God by becoming the best violin it can be. So, don't spend your life wishing you had someone else's gift. Use whatever gift God has given *you*.

So, you ask, how do I know what my gift is? At the risk of repeating myself, I'll remind you that God does two things for us: He *gifts* each of us with talents that bring us and others joy and peace, and fill us with inspiration and energy. For example, being an artist or a musician, a great cook or gardener, a fabulous host or organizer. Also, He *equips* every one of us with the ability to carry out some kind of ministry—preaching, teaching, handling parish finances, maintaining church property, visiting the sick, and so forth. God also equips us to do our jobs in the world, for those of us who are still working. Such work may not be inspiring or fulfilling, but we are able to carry out tasks well, because of God's help.

Since Paul is talking about offering our entire selves to God, it's worth mentioning that we bring not only the polished parts, not only those assets of which we are proud, but also our failures, disappointments, and the things we wish we had done differently. We place it *all* in God's hands. Then we go forth to live in His mercy, and for Him. That's what makes it a *living* sacrifice. Every morning becomes another opportunity to say: "Lord, this is Your day. I am Yours. This is the life You have given me. Show me how I may live it for You."

Sometimes that offering may look dramatic. More often, it will appear quite ordinary. It may mean listening patiently to someone who is difficult. Calling someone who is lonely. Forgiving an old hurt. Welcoming someone who feels like an outsider. Doing one's work honestly when no one is watching. Caring for a spouse, parent, or friend. Praying for someone whose name keeps coming to mind. Being willing to say, "I was wrong." Sacrificing ourselves as living offerings to God is not only confined to this altar in our church sanctuary. It is wherever we place our lives into God's hands. Our culture is obsessed with youth, speed, productivity, novelty, and achievement. But the church should tell a different story. Growing older does not mean becoming less useful to God.

In fact, some gifts can only be acquired, or equipping honed, throughout a lifetime. Wisdom. Patience. Perspective. Discernment. The ability to sit quietly with someone who is suffering. The capacity to recognize what truly matters and what does not. The courage to say, "I've been through that, too. You don't experience this alone." These are not consolation prizes for people who can no longer do what they once did. They are genuine gifts of God.

Sometimes God has been cultivating in us a certain gift for decades, and finally it turns out to be the gift someone else needs, just at the right time. There are also seasons when our gifts change. There may be a time when we lead, or teach, or build. A time when we care for others. And eventually there may come a time when we are the recipients of that care, and our greatest ministry is simply to pray. There is no age at which we become unnecessary to God or to the Body of Christ. (Repeat.) St. Paul says: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." Grace, not achievement. Our gifts are not trophies. That means we don't need to be proud when we are good at something. And we need not be ashamed when we are not. God does not ask us to be everything. God only asks us to be faithful and fruitful with what we have been given.

Perhaps one of the most freeing things a Christian can say is: "I don't have to be somebody else. I only have to offer God what God has given me." And this is where Paul's vision becomes profoundly communal. The question is not simply, "What am I good at?" It is also: "What does this community need from me?"

We belong to each other, and that is one of the great gifts of the Christian life. We need not carry every burden alone. The person sitting beside you is not simply another worshipper. That person, like you, is part of the Body of Christ. And so is the person who sometimes irritates you. And the person whose opinions are different from yours. And the person whose life seems very different from yours. And the person who needs far more from the church than you think you have to give. And the person who seems to have nothing to give you at all. We belong to one another. That is why Christian community can be both beautiful and difficult.

If church were simply a collection of people who all thought alike and behaved alike, it would be easy. But it would not be the Body of Christ. The Body has many members. Different gifts. Different histories. Different personalities. Different wounds. Different perspectives. And somehow, by the grace of God, Christ makes us one. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Most merciful God, we offer ourselves today as living sacrifices; may our offering be pleasing in Your sight. Transform our minds and align our hearts, that every gift and talent with which You have blessed us may be fully activated for Your kingdom. Help us to work together seamlessly as one body, laying down at Your altar our personal ambitions and pride, to serve You without holding back. Anchor us in hope, deepen our faith, and knit our hearts in love. May our care for one another reflect the perfect grace and unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose Name we pray. *Amen.*