



Scripture and Sermon

August 23, 2020

Pastor Kelsey

Romans 12:1-8

12 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.

2 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.

3 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. **4** For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, **5** so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. **6** We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; **7** ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; **8** the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Loving and Gracious God,

Thank you for this chance to dig into, discuss, and learn from your word. Bless this time and be present with us, help us to be open to what you want us to hear this morning.

Open our hearts and minds to receive and grow.

In your son's name, Amen.

When I think about passages like this that list some of the spiritual gifts, it makes me think of super powers. As today's passage speaks to how each of us have unique Spiritual Gifts, Superheroes almost always have specific superpowers that they use in specific ways and so no two superheroes are exactly the same. Based on how popular it is, I can assume that all of you are at least somewhat familiar with the Marvel characters. Captain America is super strong and immortal, Iron Man is tech savvy and made his body into his weapon, Spiderman has spidey powers, the Hulk is huge and invincible, Black Widow has incredible spy and ninja skills, Dr. Strange has magical powers, the list goes on. Some of them are powers gifted to them by some mystical or

scientific reason, some of them just honed a set of skills to a super level. But each one has a unique way that they fight and defeat a villain. Each of the Marvel movies about each one of these heroes is fun and enjoyable in its own right, but the Avenger movies, where they all work together are so much cooler! We get to see the ways that their powers support each other, and that when they work together they can defeat an even bigger villain than they could have faced alone. When they all work together, as one group, none of them is lesser. All of them, whether their powers are given or learned, are equally valuable in the fight for good.

Spiritual Gifts are not all that different. They are described in Romans in a similar way to how they are explained in a couple other places in Paul's letters. Paul uses the analogy of the human body that has many parts that each have their own function, but are each equally valuable to the body as a whole. It's been a few weeks since we talked about a passage outside of Matthew, so I will give the reminder that Romans is written as a letter, instead of a Narrative like we have had in Matthew. We don't have a story or a lesson to think through today, instead, we have a piece of one of Paul's letters which are mostly full of Paul's thoughts and advice on who Jesus is and how to be a good Christian. His letters are full of theology, these 8 verses are not exempt. The explanations and conclusions on just the first two verses took up 4 pages in my large book sized commentary! Romans being a letter means that some of it can be more direct as it is Paul trying to explain this faith thing to others or give them advice on how to be. It also means it can be more confusing as Paul likes talking about big and complex theological ideas, and what he meant to say versus how it sounds to us today in English do not always line up. This morning's passage, Romans 12, is a bit of a mixed bag, parts are a bit easier to understand than others. Within the letter of Romans, these verses mark the turning point in the letter where Paul switches from a focus on theology to telling the Roman Christians what to do with that information. That is why this passage begins with "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters," it is Paul saying, "In response to this powerful testimony of who Jesus is, as the one that revealed to us that we are not defined by our sin; of God's grace, forgiveness and reconciliation that are unearned but given generously; of how we are called to respond; of how nothing can separate us from God; and how God's promises are forever, for all people; in response to all that, this is the first thing I recommend you do."

The first and perhaps foremost thing that Paul calls us to do is to be a "living sacrifice." This is in contrast to the idea of a dead sacrifice that was a part of Jewish rituals, which cannot interact with the world. A living sacrifice continues interacting with the world, engaged in community. A sacrifice is often thought of by us as giving up something, which is true, but is often considered as a hardship. Sacrifice can be a hardship, but it doesn't have to be. In the case of this passage it means, a gift to God. So we should interact with the world in a way that is a gift to God, as Paul says, "Holy

and acceptable.” Living that way is “Spiritual worship.” This is a phrase I had never really thought about before, but I realized I didn’t really know what it meant. I learned that it is worship in the sense of a “way of being” instead of an isolated activity. We live our lives as a living sacrifice as a lifestyle of worship in our spirits and with the Holy Spirit. Church on Sundays is not to fill up our worship quota for the week, but to instead act as a weekly reminder to reorient us toward living our lives as God calls us to. Living as God calls us to means to allow the Spirit into your life to renew you and transform you, so that you can figure out what it means for you to be living out the Will of God, as Paul says, to figure out what makes us good, acceptable, and perfect. This verse, though familiar as people like to focus on the part that says “Do not conform to this world.” When we focus only on that first part it is easy to make it just about resisting peer pressure, or saying we should follow super strict guidelines for what we can partake in within our communities. But when we look at the whole verse, it becomes more clear that it is a sentence less about what not to do, but more about what we are supposed to do, which is to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” It is not said obviously, but, for those that understand the way Paul speaks much better than I, he means that the Spirit is renewing our minds, as it is through the Spirit that we can be guided toward what God wants, not on our own.

So it is with that dense introduction that Paul introduces the idea of Spiritual gifts. Based on the introduction, we can understand this discussion of Spiritual Gifts as the way that Paul understands how we will each live as a living sacrifice. As the Spirit helps us to discern which gifts are ours and how we are uniquely called to make a part of God’s ministry in the world. First though, he gives a clear warning, basically saying, “I am about to talk about how each of you are special, so don’t be going and getting a big head. Remember, none of you are better than anyone else.” He explains this idea by using the analogy of a body. As the body has many parts of equal importance, so does God’s people or the church. There are many parts that hold different functions that are so important, but also need each other to be doing other jobs and need to work together to have the whole body function. That is what it means to be “members one of another.” We rely on each other, both in trusting that they can and will do their part but also that we don’t have to do it all alone. This is where Paul gives examples of what he means by Spiritual gifts, which of course look differently in individuals as they are all based on our experience of God’s grace and guidance in our lives. Paul lists the gift and a description for each: Prophecy, in proportion to faith; Ministry, in ministering; Teacher, in teaching; exhortation, in exhortation (which means encouragement); giving, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; and the compassionate, in cheerfulness. He lists like he is looking around the room in a church and pointing out the gifts of those around him. The church needs people that are gifted in each of those areas in their own unique way to thrive. If we only focus on one of those areas in the church, we would only have me up here

preaching, or Mike playing music, or Earl preparing Common Ground to be this beautiful. If we had all teachers, or leaders, or encouragers, our church would not be as fruitful and vibrant as it is. I have been here for about 7 weeks, during a pandemic where you all aren't getting to do all the things you love to do, but I could write my own letter to Hopkins of the gifts and graces that I have witnessed here.

Just as the body has many parts, our church is made up of many different parts as well, no person a duplicate of another, each having their own role and passion project. So we, a diverse collection of people, are one body in Christ, and are part of each other. We have gifts that are different depending on the way we have been shaped by our life and by God: for some food preparation, in cooking and kitchen organization; some crafters, in sewing and creativity; some outreach, in working the Food Pantry or Senior Meals; some teachers, in leading Sunday School or Bible Study; some mentors, in faithfully mentoring a Hopkins student; some compassionate, in advocating for the disabled and aging; some leaders, in being on endless committees; some musicians, in piano or the choir; some growers, bringing joy through flowers and watermelon; some hospitality, in hosting community events or in welcoming someone on a Sunday; some fundraisers, in ensuring funding for whatever we need; some organization, in keeping funds or details in line; some prayers, in listening for and lifting up all requests and thanksgiving to God.

I could go on! But to be honest I was struggling to come up with the name of the gift by the end there.

Thanks be to God for the numerous gifts we see in our church.

Our church is who we are because we have all of these gifts represented in different ways. We do many things, and everyone isn't involved in everything, but yet we are all one church, one Christian community. That doesn't mean it is always easy. Sometimes our gifts and passions clash, each of us wanting our thing to be the biggest priority. Sometimes we find ourselves thinking more highly of our thing over others. Sometimes we have to put in some work finding unity on a task that requires different areas of the body to work together. Our own struggles with finding unity in the body is surely not only our problem, Paul would not have been writing this advice to the Romans if they were experts at it! Church communities have struggled with remembering they are one body in Christ since soon after Jesus was on this earth. And I bet people were struggling with it even before then. But we are called to put in the work, to find what gift God has for each of us, and to find unity within the community.

Living into our unique gift and finding the way it fits into the Body of Christ, using it to contribute to the whole body thriving as best it can is one of the major ways to live as a living sacrifice. When we live into our gifts, when we spend the time to figure them out and then put them to use, we are gifting our whole selves to God's work in the

world. When we put in the even harder work to help all of our gifts work together for the sake of God's Kingdom on earth, we become members one of another. We become the true Body of Christ, not thinking we have to do it all alone, not trying to make our thing the most important. We need the diversity of gifts of the church to make ministry happen as it does here with Hopkins and South Monterey UMCs, all of the areas of ministry that you have cultivated and supported is what makes this Christian community a vital one, one that is growing and has the ability to dream and make future plans instead of just waiting to die off. Something beautiful is happening here, let us continue to look for where God is leading us next to continue toward what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The good news is that we are not in this work alone! To bring it back to the Avengers, we are not like those Superheroes who have no one but each other to help figure out what is right and just. We are not on this journey or in the church alone, blindly trying to figure out what works and what God wants or what doesn't. We have the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit is at work within each of us and amongst all of us and around our whole church, breathing new life and giving support and guidance as we figure out where God wants us to go. The Spirit transforms us toward God's Will, both for ourselves and as the body of Christ. Allow the Spirit to work within you, do not keep your mind stuck on the ideas and values of this world, but allow the Spirit into your mind to continue growing in your understanding of yourself, your part in the Body of Christ, and God's vision for where our church can be a part of God's even greater plans.

I won't tiptoe around it anymore, we have a chance to put this into action today at our meeting after church. We have experienced a moment where different parts of our church body have collided in the middle, and we have a chance now to figure out how to come together as the one body in Christ. We have a chance to listen to each other and the ways that the Spirit has formed them to be a part of the church in their unique way. We have a chance to get a glimpse of the bigger picture of the work of the Spirit amongst us. We have a chance to take a new approach to the conversation. We have a chance today to remember that we are all working for the same Body of Christ and to listen for the movement of the Spirit amongst us, helping us figure out where to go next. Let it be so.

Will you pray with me?

Gracious and Giving God,

Thank you for the movement of your Spirit that reminds us that you are preparing a way for us. This text speaks to this moment in our church in ways that we could not have expected when the lectionary was knit together long ago. Your Spirit works in such mysterious and wonderful ways, guiding us, empowering us, and renewing us. Help us to accept the movement of the Spirit around us and in ourselves. Help us to listen to the

nudges of the Spirit toward our gifts and the ways that our gifts can be a living sacrifice to the work you are doing in and through our church. Be with us as we put this teaching from Paul into action this afternoon, working out how to move forward as the body while honoring the gifts, graces, and passions that you have planted amongst us. Beyond today, help us to remember to continue living into our unique gifts and to continue listening to the Spirit's guidance for how our gifts fit together to make your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. When we feel like we have nothing to give, when we feel like we have nothing left to give, remind us of our special gift, help us find it, or help us find it anew, or help us find what gift you are leading to us next. Come Spirit, come. Fill us with your goodness and grace. We pray this all in your Son's holy name, Amen.