

Sermon :: 23-Aug-2026
Proper 16, Year A

“ present *your* bodies as a living sacrifice ... to God ”

I have a confession ... or maybe a correction ... to make—at least to whoever among you who has heard my story of how I came to be a priest. For a long time now, it’s gone (in brief) something like this: I first felt a calling when I was a teenager ... but for decades, it wasn’t the right time in *my* life and/or the life of the Church I’d be *ordained* in (theological debates over human sexuality being what they were, *then*, across mainline Protestant denominations)¹ ... and then, finally, thanks to the spiritual isolation—or *honing*—of our living in China for a few years, I felt God calling me *again*, in a way I knew I could no longer refuse.

Now, there’s nothing *wrong* with this story; it’s accurate *factually*. But it’s incomplete ... a bit too ‘tidy,’ *spiritually*. For the truth is: Wherever my *head* thought God was leading me, my *heart* hadn’t been willing to *follow*. You see, for *decades*, I was something of a ‘transactional’ Christian. Yes, I was baptized as an infant and had reaffirmed my faith in Jesus Christ at my confirmation. I attended worship regularly; paid my monthly pledge; sang in the choir; served on councils and committees; was a senior high fellowship advisor; and with Jim, co-organized a huge weekend ‘soup kitchen’ our large church put on once-a-year in the heart of Trenton, New Jersey.

But the truth was: This was all stuff I *volunteered* ... *elected* ... *opted* to do. I left no room ... made no allowance ... for what God may have been *calling* me to do, with my life—a life *I felt* belonged entirely to *me*. Thus, my ‘*transactional*’ faith: Jesus died to forgive our sins and grant us eternal life, and I’d accepted Him and with Him, His gifts. Now, all I had to do was wait to *die* ... when He’d ‘take care’ of everything. And *until* then, *my* time was *mine*.

As I said, that all began to change in China. And since then, the last ten or twelve years ... leading up to seminary, leading up to ordination and serving as a priest ... have been one fairly continuous lesson in ¶how much God calls—*seeks*—us to give ourselves over to *God’s* work in this world; ¶how much Jesus *delights* in our dedicating our time and our energy to worshipping Him, through *commitment* and *service*; ¶how earnestly and frequently the Holy Spirit calls us to be in deeper relationship ... by surrendering some of our ‘autonomy’—some of our jealously guarded ‘independence’—and dedicating more of our selves—our *bodies*—to walking in God’s ways and delighting in God’s will. After *faith*, our *bodies* are the most precious things we can offer God. And when we don’t, we miss out on how much the Holy has to *say* to us ... how much Jesus can *accomplish through* us.

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We hear, today, the ‘origin stories’ of two biblical heroes who will devote their *whole bodies* to God. After a long *prologue*, Moses’ mother gives her son—bodily—over to the pharaoh’s daughter, thus rescuing him from the horrific enslavement of Israel-in-Egypt. Later, after he’s accepted God’s call, Moses’ education and familiarity with the ways of the court, no doubt, will *assist* him in helping God

¹ For the record, the Episcopal Church ‘got there’ before the Presbyterian Church (USA) that I was part of ... but part of my journey to ordination, it turned out, also included finding the Episcopal Church.

liberate Israel from Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land: work that consumes the rest of Moses' earthly life.²

And in St Peter's 'naming' story, we catch a glimpse of how *his* body ... the sum and substance—the length, depth and breadth—of *his* life ... will become the “rock” on which Jesus will build His Church ... even unto Peter's eventual martyrdom, in Rome.³

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Sandwiched right in *between* these two early, fleeting images of men who give their entire lives, and livelihoods, over to the work of God ... we hear St Paul's invitation—*injunction?*—to the Christians in Rome: “present *your* bodies as a living sacrifice ... to God.” Now, to be sure, Paul *is* speaking of morals and ethics; of right-*mindedness* and clean-*heartedness*: of living truly *holy* lives that aren't all bound up in the crass competitiveness and conspicuous consumption that this *world* values. But Paul's *also* talking about what we *do* with our lives ... how we *utilize* our time ... how we *expend* our energies. Or better *yet* ... what we allow—*invite*—*God* to do with them.

We are all one *body*—the Body of *Christ*—says Paul. But at the *same* time, we are also all *individual members* (think of a hand or an ear or an elbow) *of* that Body. Therefore, like every member of our own *human* bodies ... each of us has a unique, individual—and *valuable*; maybe even *invaluable*—role to play *within* Christ's Body, the *Church*: as those who inspire and invite; those who teach and train; those who care for and tend to the needs⁴ of others; those who urge and encourage; those who direct and manage; and those who do mercy and offer compassion. Paul's list is wide and varied, and stated in rather generic terms ... for he doesn't know all the particulars of a Church that has properties commissions and potluck suppers, budgets and bulletins, columbarium teams and clean-up days; that makes crafts to sell at marketplaces or elects parishioners to something called a “vestry.”

But whatever the *era*, Paul's message is *clear*: Jesus desires not just our belief, but also our *bodies*; claims not just our checkbooks, but also our *charitable works*; calls not just on Sunday mornings, but also the *rest* of the week ... as we learn to engage—*express*—and, indeed, *enjoy*—our faith by giving our *bodies* over to the work—the *doing*—of Christ's *Church*. Contrary to the mistaken mindset *I* harbored for *decades* ... *full* faith—*mature* faith—*responsive* faith—isn't accepting Jesus and then just sitting back, settling in and waiting your turn to enter the pearly gates! *No!* Faith *also* involves actively discerning—*here* and *now*—how God is calling us to *act* ... to *serve* ... to *become* the member of Jesus' Body that God's *created* us to be. And *how?*

- Join the choir ... help Karissa plan a family hike ... or organize a small fellowship group to meet once-a-month
- Work at Showers of Blessings, in Ocean Beach, on a Saturday ... help us vision new outreach opportunities ... or recruit speakers to teach the adult education classes we'll begin offering this year

² By tradition (although without scriptural authority; see Deut 34:1-8), Moses is taken up, *bodily*, into heaven after he dies at the threshold to the Promised Land. (God does not let him enter the land because Moses, at one point, had seemed to claim as his own some of the power that God had given him (*i.e.*, to make water flow from a rock in the middle of the desert wilderness (Numb 20:1-13).)

³ Jesus foretells Peter's persecution in John 21:18-19.

⁴ Both physical and spiritual, in Paul's meaning.

- Volunteer at St Mark's food pantry, in City Heights, on a Wednesday ... paint some office doors ... or help us grasp how All Souls' can better attract and engage families with school-age children
- Assist the Altar Guild in preparing communion or the Flower Guild in arranging flowers ... take a meal or a night at the Interfaith Shelter Network, in February ... or get involved with the Scout troop we sponsor
- Minister to recruits going through boot camp at MCRD ... help keep the columbarium fresh and tidy ... or help us launch a 'docent' program that opens the doors of this wonderful building to visitors during the week
- Refinish some kitchen cabinets ... serve at this Altar, or read at this Ambo ... or call on parishioners who can't be here one Sunday—or maybe *any* Sunday
- Prepare a monthly meal for a local women's center ... plan our next parish retreat, this spring ... or help us dream how All Souls' can better serve the seniors in our community
- Sign up for a parish workday, in October ... commit to any one of a 'hundred' different roles at this December's Christmas Marketplace ... or help make sure every newcomer among us feels at-home and connected, all year-round

And that's just *this* month's list! At All Souls', we offer more ways for you to use *your* bodies as members of our *church*-body than you can imagine. And what's more, if you have a good idea that we *haven't* thought of ... we'll probably say, "Thanks—go right ahead!" You don't need to be elected or commissioned. You don't need to complete lots of training. You don't need to be part of a certain group ... have been here a certain length of time ... or commit to a certain number of hours. We're flexible ... we're open ... and we're fun.

And so, the question: How will *you* present *your* body to All Souls', to help with the ministry and mission of this parish? For *however* you do ... you *also* present your body as a "living sacrifice" to *God* ... and heed your calling—your *bodily* calling—to be a 'member'—a *true* and *active* member—of *Christ's* Body, too.

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