For Such a Time Romans 12: 1-8

Brandon was a homeless guy in Austin who found his way to Central Presbyterian Church somehow. I don’t know if he heard about the monthly bus pass drawing, or came for the men’s clothing closet, or just liked the look of the church courtyard. Whatever it was, Brandon started showing up regularly at the church. He came at first because it was a place where he could get help. Before long, he was coming, and coming again, and staying because it was a place where he could both get *and* *give* help. Where he could mow the grass and pick up trash from the alley and do the dishes after a fellowship meal. The church became a place where he could tell his story and hear other people’s stories; a place where he could become part of creating a new shared story. He realized – and liked – that the church was a place where he could be a living sacrifice; where he found himself fully welcomed and fully engaged. It was the place where he could offer the work of his hands and the kindness of his heart for the good of the whole community.

Within that church community, Brandon found opportunities to both receive and to offer hope and help. Within the church community, in a context of covenant, Brandon found siblings in Christ with whom he could engage in holy living.

I know that for many of us, the experience of finding our place within a faith community has not been as abrupt and definitive as Brandon’s experience was at Central Pres in Austin. Many of us have been on a gentle and gradual path for most of our lives. Whether we have been part of the church for years or for minutes, it is, at its best, the place that provides all of us with the context and the desire to present ourselves as a living sacrifice.

It is, at its best, a place that encourages and equips us to recognize our gifts and use them on behalf of one another, the community, and the world.

Our Rally Day theme is Church for Such a Time as This: Our Unique Opportunities for Hope, Help, and Holy Living. And there are certainly some distinct characteristics to this moment. Each day’s news brings us new information and new images that make it undeniably clear that the world is filled with danger, sorrow, and need. We are many months into a global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus that has infected at least six and a half million people in the U.S. and killed nearly 200,000. It continues to take a deadly toll both here and around the world.

In this early and extreme fire season, there are terrifying stories about the wildfires ravaging the western U.S. As of Friday, there were 28 major wildfires in California alone; more than 600,000 acres have been burned in Washington state; and more than 10% of the population of Oregon is under evacuation orders due to fires in that state.

There is another storm forming in the Gulf of Mexico, even as the people along the Gulf Coast of western Louisiana and eastern Texas work to recover from the damage wrought by Hurricane Laura. The people of Iowa are still struggling in the aftermath of recent devastating storms, although their plight has gotten very little news coverage because there simply is not time right now to cover every catastrophe that is occurring.

Some of the catastrophes we face are the result of human actions rather than nature’s power. Our nation continues to grapple with deep divisions over political issues and social issues and racial injustice and culture preferences and countless other causes for arguments and anger. Many of us seem to have decided to disagree over everything everywhere all the time. That decision is not serving us well.

The peculiar moment in which we find ourselves this morning is fraught with anxiety and tension and conflict. It is also rich with unprecedented opportunities to create a future that heals wounds and brings justice and makes peace in ways both large and small. We find ourselves this morning in a time that matters.

But the truth is that we are always in a time that matters. Every day in the history of the world has presented challenges. Every morning since creation’s first dawn has brought opportunities for the humans alive in that dawn to learn and to grow. Whatever the particular circumstances of the particular moment, the world needs people who will be living sacrifices, who strive to worship and adore God, who are dedicated to the well-being of others and committed to the stewardship of creation.

On this morning, as on every morning, we are called to be Church for Our Moment. To discern and fulfill our opportunities for hope and help and holy living. The particulars of this week, this month, this year are pushing us to find creative new ways of being the church, but rather than lament what we are doing without, I pray that we can embrace what we are finding – including the novel experience of a courtyard Rally Day and this al fresco worship service that we hope is Zooming out to our sisters and brothers who have joined us from home.

As scriptural support for our Rally Day theme of finding and fulfilling opportunities for hope, help, and holy living, we have read a familiar section of Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. These verses have long been cherished as a description of Christian life. They call us to live as those devoted to God and committed to building a community in which every individual’s gift contributes to a flourishing whole.

I want to make one point about the language of Paul’s letter to the Christians in the church at Rome. In the first verse of the passage we read today, Paul instructs them to present *their bodies* as *a living sacrifice.* “Bodies” is plural. “Sacrifice” is singular. That is a helpful thing to notice. They are a *living sacrifice* together, united by the Holy Spirit into a covenant community that worships, witnesses, and works in concert. They do not each have their own personal sacrifice silo from which to offer their own private, disconnected sacrifices, but instead are joined together by the Spirit to worship God as a unified body.

What Paul writes to the Roman church applies to First Presbyterian Church of McAllen as well and I think it is an especially helpful note for us this morning as we prepare to ordain and install Ruling Elders to serve on the Session.

David Rowland, Dana Friedman, Eduardo Mendoza, and Nick Wright have said yes to serving this congregation as Ruling Elders. They have responded to God’s call upon their lives and agreed to serve as spiritual leaders for this community as together we seek to discern how we are called to be Church in and for such as time as this.

Our Presbyterian Book of Order says this of Ruling Elders:

As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided persons with particular gifts to share in the discernment of God’s Spirit and governance of God’s people. Ruling elders are not so named because they “lord it over” the congregation, but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. (G-2.0301)

Together with the Ruling Elders who are continuing on the Session, Eduardo, Nick, Dana, and David will lead us in discerning how this congregation is called to live out being “Church for Such a Time as This”. They will use their gifts to strengthen and nurture the faith and life through which we all use our individual gifts for the benefit of all.

Our Ruling Elders have accepted the particular responsibility of their office, but they do their work as our partners, not our supervisors. We are all called to ministry. Together we are church, the Body of Christ, all saved by grace, all endowed with gifts, all called to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world.

May we fulfill the unique opportunities of our time to find and speak hope, to receive and give help, to commit ourselves to the joy and purpose of holy living.

In your Rally Day bag, you will find several bookmarks with a selection of verses, including some from the Romans passage we have read this morning. These verses illustrate our Rally Day theme of opportunities for hope, help, and holy living. I encourage you to read over the verses you have received and to perhaps select one that especially resonates with you. Post it where you will see it regularly. Let that verse be a beacon in the coming weeks. Let it lead you to share your unique gifts; to be – in your own beloved, blessed way – a part of church in such a time as this.

Amen.