In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning’s sermon is from our Epistle Lesson, Romans Chapter 12. The opening verse of that chapter includes an idea that would have sounded strange in the ears of early Christians – both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. It is the idea of a “living sacrifice.” This wonderful verse, with its strange phrase, goes this way:

[St. Paul is writing:] 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. (Romans 12:1, NRSV)

This is my topic for this morning: presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice to our God. The goal of my sermon is that we should do this thing – we should present our bodies, with increasing earnestness, as a living sacrifice to our loving God.

By way of introduction I am happy to point ahead to Reformation Sunday, this coming October 29. Please remember that good day, October 29, and try with all your heart to attend that day, and also to bring lots of people with you! On that great Sunday – the 500th anniversary of our Lutheran tradition – we are bringing in one of the big names in Lutheranism here in America: I am speaking of theologian Gilbert Meilaender – longtime Professor of Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Dr. Meilaender is set to preach for us that day, but also I have invited him to give a coffee hour talk. His topic then will be “Lutheranism and Christian Vocation.” Vocation is one of the most important topics for our own spiritual lives and for the future of the church in the modern world. We must talk more about Christian life Monday through Sunday, in our homes and in our jobs, and every minute of life that God grants to us.

My topic this morning is along these lines. When St. Paul urges his brothers and sisters in the church to present their bodies as a “living sacrifice,” this includes continual, daily offering of ourselves to God. A dead sacrifice cannot do that. A dead sacrifice might be an offering at the time of death, but it is not a continual offering. It is not an offering Monday through Sunday. It takes a living sacrifice to do that. Let us be such living sacrifices to our God.
Now, let us notice about our text that it contains the word “therefore”:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice... (Romans 12:1, NRSV)

That is, the apostle is building his appeal to spiritual worship on arguments that have come before, in earlier chapters of Romans. What arguments? Why, God’s unquenchable love for us, justification by faith, and about casting our lives and hopes upon Jesus. Paul has taught us about prayer and the church and about resurrection to eternal life. He has taught us all these great things about our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And now he teaches us about ourselves, that we should present ourselves as living sacrifices to our God.

How do we do this? Let me begin with one of my favorite passages in Martin Luther. Luther is speaking up in defense of a little child – a girl who lends her hand to helping her mother. Such little ones are often overlooked in this world, but Luther praises this little one. Listen to what he says. He starts off by talking about the eye-catching vestments and liturgies in the church, and then he shifts to the little child. The passage goes this way:

Aided by great pomp, splendor, and magnificent buildings, they [these eye-catching works] are so adorned that everything gleams and glitters. There is burning of incense, singing and ringing of bells, lighting of tapers and candles until nothing else can be seen or heard. For when a priest stands in a gold-embroidered chasuble or a layman remains on his knees a whole day in church, this is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor girl tends a little child, or faithfully does what she is told, that is regarded as nothing. (Large Catechism, “Conclusion of the Ten Commandments”)

Well, the world might regard the work of the poor girl “as nothing,” but Luther certainly does not, and nor should we. The poor girl who tends a little child or faithfully does what she is told is doing a deed that is not restricted to a certain time and place, it is not surrounded by incense and lit candles, she does not wear a golden chasuble, she has no ordination as a priest or a bishop or a pope. She is simply doing a daily deed of goodness. She is presenting herself as a living sacrifice to our God. This is the stuff of Christian life, Monday through Sunday. It is in such daily good deeds that we have our true spiritual worship. It is such daily good deeds of kindness and obedience to the commandments of God that our world needs. Indeed the church needs to be
adorned by Christians who do not restrict their spiritual worship to Sunday but who offer themselves as living sacrifices all the time. As the saying goes, we need Christians who “walk the walk.”

And so this is a beginning discussion of what it means to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God: obey the commandment to honor father and mother, as did the little child in the Luther passage. Indeed let us do the best we can to obey all of the commandments of God, and in that way let us present our bodies as a living sacrifice to our God.

But the great thing about Romans Chapter 12 is that it permits us to press on in understanding our topic -- being a living sacrifice to God. In the remaining verses of this morning’s reading, we can see three ideas that can help us along toward such a holy life. When St. Paul thinks of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, his mind seems inevitably to move on to three topics. Briefly, here they are: (1) We should look to Jesus Christ, and not to the ways of the world, in order to discover our spiritual worship. (2) Practice humility. Never let conformity to Christ cause us to be arrogant in relationship to others. And (3) Remember the church. Let’s look at these points one by one.

First, to figure out what it means to present ourselves as a living sacrifice, let us look to Jesus, rather than to the ways of the world. St. Paul puts the point this way:

\[2\text{Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2, NRSV)}\]

This is important! Indeed, I believe that if the church is going to have much to offer the world going forward, we must be looking to Jesus for our notions of a holy life, and not to the world we are trying to love and serve. Things are changing. We might be heading into a world in which such things as euthanasia, infanticide, and physician-assisted suicide are not considered simply permissible but also virtuous. We might be heading into a world in which solemn promises of marriage or vocation are considered to be “words just words.” We might be heading into a world in which people are not taught about God, are not taught about creation, are not taught about the soul, are not taught about how precious a human life is, and are left to think that all there is to life is some accident of cosmic dust coming together. In such a world, if we would present our bodies as a living sacrifice, then we must learn about what is good and true and lovely in a human life from our Savior Jesus Christ. If the church has nothing to say that is different from what the world is saying, then how we going to help the world? But we must help our world!

Second, St. Paul presses on to urge humility in us:
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. (Romans 12:3, NRSV)

It is as if this is the necessary next step. The apostle has already called upon Christians to be conformed to Christ and not to the world. But by no means does he want Christians to be haughty concerning the world. If we think soberly concerning ourselves, we will acknowledge that we too are sinners dependent upon the mercy of Jesus. Apart from him, we are lost. We are all beggars, in need of the help of Jesus. Do not let spiritual pride lead us to think that we are holier than others.

And third, St. Paul speaks of our life in the church. He points out that God distributes his gifts variously:

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. (Romans 12:6-8, NRSV)

If we would present our bodies as living sacrifices to God, we should be mindful that our brothers and sisters in the church also have gifts and talents to offer to the Lord. We should try to fit in harmoniously with our brothers and sisters, feeling no need to lord it over them, and being grateful for the gifts they have, even when their gifts are greater than our own.

This third point, about remembering the church, is crucial if we would be people who offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. For one thing, coming to church involves the body. When the body could be resting in bed or having Sunday brunch, we instead offer our bodies as living sacrifices by bringing our bodies to church. And then, it is in church that we learn about Jesus, so that we have a chance to conform ourselves to him. Indeed, it is in church that we walk up to Jesus at the Communion rail and hear him speak sweet words of love to us. And then again, it is in church that we get a vision of how humanity should be – a vision of fellowship and of mutual affection and of respect for one another that goes far beyond the ordinary differences of wealth and education, differences of color and age. It is in church that such a variety of humanity can kneel shoulder to shoulder and receive the same blessing from the same Lord – “This is my body, this is my blood, given for you.” Putting it all together, it is in church that we have a living example of
how we should treat people Monday through Sunday so that we might offer ourselves as living sacrifices to our good God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen