

Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Minds

Romans 12:2

Romans 12:1-8
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In an age when so many mainline congregations are dwindling in membership, or have had to merge with another church to stay alive, or closed their doors all together, why do you suppose College Hill Presbyterian Church is still here? And not only still here, but in my humble opinion such a vibrant and relevant congregation?

There are many answers to that question, of course, including our particular **ministry of inclusion, hospitality, justice and compassion**. I would venture to add that it also has a lot to do with the fact that throughout its 102 year history, **this congregation has chosen to respond in dynamic ways to constant change:**

- changes in the very makeup of the membership of this congregation,
- vast changes within this neighborhood,
- even greater changes within society in general.
- and changes brought by new challenges to traditional and orthodox understandings of church doctrine and biblical interpretation.

So I guess a good question to ask is this: Why do you suppose that you, and those that have preceded you here at College Hill, have been open enough to embrace these changes (or at least learn to adjust to and cope with them)?

Again, there are many answers. But what I think has occurred, in part, is what the Apostle Paul has written about in Romans 12. In what I consider to be a crucially important verse in the Bible, Paul instructs us, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." With the human tendency to be prejudiced toward that which is different, **how else can the ever-present fear of change be overcome unless there is some kind of transformation from the norm?**

The actual Greek word that Paul uses for 'transformation' is *metamorphousthai*, from which we also get the word 'metamorphosis,' which is a much stronger and dynamic word than transformation. Paul is calling for nothing less than our metamorphosis, our transformation through the power of God. And this transformation by the renewing [the changing] of our mind isn't a one-time event. Rather, it is an **ongoing, continual transformation and renewal.**

The 12th chapter of Romans marks a transformation, of sorts, in the structure of Paul's letter. For Paul, the concept of living in **faithful obedience** is what Christianity is all about. Therefore, **faith and obedience go hand in hand**. Chapters 1-11 of Romans deal primarily with the faith part of faithful obedience. These chapters are generally designated as the 'theological' section of the letter. Beginning with chapter 12, and continuing through the end, Paul shifts his focus to the obedience part of faithful obedience.

This is where Paul offers 'ethical' instructions – the practical side of how to live a life of faith – a life that finds its base in all the theological background that he has just so meticulously presented.

Again, for Paul there is no separation between faith and obedience. In other words, **our inward transformation, which includes the thoughts in our minds, needs to result in an outward Christ-like behavior. Otherwise, what's the point?** Or as I like to state it: Live your transformation! Be renewed, so that what proceeds from your transformed mind does indeed reflect the image of God in your outward actions and behavior.

The big question is: How do you and I, how does this congregation, do this? In part, Paul tells us to do this through worship – but an expanded definition and understanding of worship. According to Paul, true worship isn't just a matter of what we do here on Sunday mornings in this sanctuary. Rather, **the true worship of God is reflected every day of our lives in and through our thoughts, attitudes and actions.**

Paul says we must present ourselves – make ourselves available – to God. He states it a way that sounds a bit strange to our ears, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice." There's a lot to unpack in that statement, but what this basically means is that **we are to worship God with our entire selves in our everyday life. All of life, therefore, should be lived in a state of worship. And since there is no place where God is not present, the entire world (not just the church) should be seen as a sanctuary.**

Paul diverges, however, from the classic Greek distinction between body and spirit. Worship, therefore, isn't something we do with just our hearts, minds, spirits and prayers. It also includes what we do with our bodies. So, Paul instructs us that our attitudes *and* our actions together are our proper sacrifice to God.

We don't talk enough about the meaning of **sacrifice**. So it may help, at this point, to remember what the Old Testament passage from Micah 6:6, 8 states about proper sacrifice.

*With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings...? God has told you, O people, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to **do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?***

This may indeed be what Paul has in mind when he tells us not to be conformed to this world – a world that is filled with attitudes and actions of injustice, cruelty, selfishness and pride. Another way to translate Romans 12:2, then, is "Do not let yourselves be shaped by what everyone else does, but rather let yourselves be transformed by a whole new way of thinking, so that you can discern what conforms to God's will." In other words, **do not model your behavior on the values of the world around you.** What we have here, then, is a clear call to **nonconformity**. Do we have any nonconformists here this morning? I bet we do.

There's an old biblical principle at work here, (one that modern psychology also adheres to as well). **In order to act differently, we need to begin by thinking differently.** That, in turn, is reinforced by our actions (cognitive behavior). Working toward justice for all people, doing acts of kindness for others, walking humbly with God, and I would add striving for inclusiveness, basically begins with *thoughts* of justice, kindness, humility and inclusion. These very thoughts themselves reflect the Holy Spirit's work in our lives and the ongoing process of the renewing of our minds.

This call to present our entire selves to God, and the call for the transformation of our minds form the basis for *all* the ethical instructions that follow in chapters 12-15 in the Book of Romans. Starting in verses 3-8 of chapter 12 (the remaining portion of today's Epistle reading), Paul turns to how we should live life within the Christian community.

Living life in true community is a primary focus in all of Paul's writings!

Paul begins by reminding us to be humble, to not think too highly of ourselves. This is in relation to the various gifts that God has blessed each one of us with. While it is true that those gifts have been given to us individually, their purpose is to be **exercised for the common good of the entire community**, not merely for our own personal stature or gain.

Paul uses his famous metaphorical analogy comparing the community of faith to the human body. Our bodies have many diverse parts, but each is necessary to the proper functioning of the whole. The difference between each of us, then, is not that some have been blessed with gifts while others have not. The difference consists of the fact that not all of us have received the same gift. That means that not every Christian will have the gift of teaching, or of singing, or of social action, or of caring for those in need, or for church leadership, or for finances, or for looking after the building and grounds, or for preaching.

Beneath this passage, then, there lies some very important implications. Primarily, this passage urges you to **know yourselves** – including an honest assessment of your own capabilities. This passage also urges you to **accept yourself** and your own particular giftedness. And it urges you to **use the gifts that God has given you**. In the process, we are not to envy someone else's gift or engage in competition. Neither are we to boast about our own giftedness. **For there is no pecking order, no superiority, no hierarchy of abilities – just different believers with different gifts.**

So this coming week, I appeal to you to reflect upon the following three questions:

1. How is God (in the past and currently) transforming you by the renewing of your mind?
2. How are you daily offering your body – your entire self – as a living sacrifice to God and the work and ministry of Jesus?
3. How are you using your God-given gifts and talents for the common good of the kingdom of God, and for this particular community of faith?

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to **live your transformation!**

Amen.

Resources:
Romans by David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion series, 1995.