

Live Your Transformation!

*“Do not be conformed to this world,
but 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 churches are dwindling in membership, or have had to merge with another church to stay alive, or to close their doors all together, **why do you suppose College Hill Presbyterian Church is still here? And not only still here, but so vibrant and relevant?**

There are many answers to that question, of course, including our particular **ministry of openness, hospitality, and acceptance**. And in my observations during the five months that I have been your pastor, I would venture to guess that the continued vitality and relevance of this church has a lot to do with the fact that throughout its history, **this congregation has chosen to respond in dynamic ways to constant change:**

- changes in the makeup of the membership of this congregation,
- vast changes within this neighborhood,
- and even greater changes within society in general.

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 one of the most important verses 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.”

How else can the ever-present fear of change, as well as the tendency to be prejudiced toward that which is different, 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,’ a much stronger and dynamic word than transformation. Paul is calling for our metamorphosis, our transformation through the power of God.

Take note that the imperative is 'be transformed,' not 'transform yourselves.' This places **the primary emphasis of our transformation on the activity of God in our lives. And this transformation by the renewing [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. Chapters 1-11 of Romans are generally designated as the 'theological' or 'doctrinal' section of the letter. Beginning with chapter 12, and continuing through the end, Paul shifts his focus to the task of offering '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.

For Paul, there is no separation between faith and obedience – between what we believe, and our calling to put our beliefs into action. In other words, our inward transformation, which begins with 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 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 be used by God. He states it this way, "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.** 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 from the classic Greek distinction between body and spirit. **Worship, therefore, isn't something we do with just our hearts, minds and spirits, but also includes what we do with our bodies.** So, Paul instructs us that our attitudes *and* our conduct together are our proper sacrifice to God.

We perhaps 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 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, and 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 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.

And 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.** Working toward justice for all people, doing acts of kindness for others, walking humbly with God, and striving for inclusiveness all 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 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 community is a primary focus in all of Paul’s writings.** He begins by talking about 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 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, or for encouraging others, or whatever.

It follows, then, that it is **only when each member contributes her or his own task that the body of the Church functions as God and Christ intend it to function. What Paul is stating is that with the renewing of our minds comes the calling to corporate responsibility. Yes, this is a call to service that is extended to each and every one of us.**

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 gift. **For there is no pecking order, no superiority, no hierarchy of abilities – just different believers with different gifts.**

Or, using the analogy I made with the children earlier in this service: Each of us make up just a single piece of colored glass in our stained glass window. And just as that window is only complete when each different piece of glass is in place, our church (and the church universal, for that matter) is complete only when each one of us is contributing the time, talents, and resources that we have been blessed with. (Gracious, I hadn't really planned on making this such a stewardship sermon when I started.)

God has given us the grace and abilities for our multiple and mutually supportive tasks, and whatever they are they must be exercised to the full extent of our powers.

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

1. How has God, and how is God, 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 Christ?
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 to **LIVE YOUR TRANSFORMATION!**

Amen.