

“It’s about Transformation”

Scripture: Romans 12:1-2

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Almost a century ago, there was a famous evangelist named Billy Sunday, who traveled throughout the United States, holding revival meetings. Billy Sunday was a precursor to Billy Graham. In fact, when Billy Graham was 5 years old, his parents took him to a revival in Charlotte led by Billy Sunday. Billy Sunday understood his mission, much as Billy Graham has understood his mission: “My job is to preach for conversion.” In fact, Billy Sunday was so convinced that conversion was the only thing that mattered that he is reported to have said: “The best thing that could happen to a man would be to get saved at a revival meeting, and then walk out into the street and get run over by a truck.” Conversion is all that matters.

What a poor understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ! Yes, there is conversion... but the real business of the church is in the business of transformation.

Now let me unpack these two terms, conversion and transformation. Conversion... that is the conscious acceptance that I am a Christian; I am a follower of Jesus Christ; my life and indeed my destiny is wrapped up in the life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For many of you, conversion is a sort of an awkward term. You are perhaps like me in that you grew into Christian faith. You were baptized as infant. There was never a time that you can point to in which you were not a Christian. There may have been times when you did not practice your faith or that faith was not particularly central to your life, but you never felt like a pagan or atheist or anti-Christian. Your conversion has been a process over time.

Others of you have a different story to tell. You can identify a time that you moved from rebelling against God’s call in Jesus Christ, or ignoring God’s call in Jesus Christ, or just being ignorant of God’s call in Jesus Christ. In other words, you can point to a time where there was a transition, a change, a conversion: you went from being outside the faith to inside the faith.

There is but one conversion—whether it is a growing process or a dramatic shift. There is but one conversion but there are multiple transformations. Transformation is shaping and continually reshaping of our lives after Jesus Christ. As John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church put it: “No one ever graduates from the school of Christ on this side of the grave.” We are always learning, reforming, reversioning, and redoing. Indeed, the transformation never ends. This is why we who have been at the faith for a while are not particularly far ahead of those who have just come to faith or are considering the call of God. Conversion is a great equalizer: one conversion but the process of transformation process is ongoing.

Consider the text today. These are not words addressed to outsiders but to insiders; these words are addressed to Christians, to people who have very consciously said, “This is who I am.” The apostle Paul says (Romans 12:1-2):

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.² 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.

The work of conversion may be done in saying, “I am a follower of Jesus Christ,” but Paul says to insiders: You keep on presenting your total selves (that’s what Paul means by “body” here...not just our physical self)...you keep on presenting your total selves. That leads to a transformation, a change, a reshaping where you are no longer conformed to the patterns of the world around but rather by the gracious will of God.

It’s about transformation. Sometimes I hear folks say, “We don’t want to change just for the sake of change.” One problem with that statement is that I really don’t know many people who are like that; and particularly not in the church. When someone does not want to change, there are basically two reasons. One, I don’t change because I find life in what I am doing. So, when the Mormon missionary at my door is inviting me to change, I don’t change because I find life in what I am practicing now. Some changes do not take place because what we are doing is already life-giving. But, transformation or change more often does not take place for a different and darker reason: I don’t change because I am afraid of the pain or do not want the bother or cannot cope with the trouble that goes with it. Even good changes bring some pain and discomfort.

So, if you are not open to change...then you are really are in the wrong place today. It’s about transformation. And that is where the life, the abundant life promised in Jesus, is discovered, encountered, and embraced in our faith...in the transformation.

So, what does transformation look like? Let me suggest some ways you will know it.

Change or transformation takes a Biblical focus. Throughout the long history of the church, the most lasting, vital, and powerful transformations took place as people become reconnected or connected anew with Scripture. On this last Sunday in October, often recognized as Reformation Sunday, it is instructive to remember the story of Martin Luther in the Protestant Reformation. His transformation came through the study of the book of Romans. Luther was transformed and continued to be transformed by his immersion into the Bible.

This is not just to know some of the stories or even to recite some of the verses but seeing our lives in light of a Biblical focus. In the congregational survey that we took last spring, we named a sense of spiritual malaise—of a vacuum, of emptiness in us—as one of our most important priorities. Great revivals and transformations have occurred as Christians did not stop with their conversion but lived with, became conversant with, put on the words and themes of Scripture.

So, there are members of this congregation that are quick to let the church office know if the quarterly devotional, “These Days,” has not been put out for them to pick up. “These Days” is a

daily devotional with Scripture readings. The Men's Bible Class has committed to reading the New Testament in the next 12 months and has invited church members to join them. I have renewed a daily commitment to read Scripture and set aside time to pray. That's time when things on my "to-do" list do not get done.

I have recommitted to practices that I had neglected. I will admit to being a pretty fair scholar of the Bible...I know lots of stuff. A personal temptation is to think, "Been there, done that." But I have committed to a reasonably daily practice of doing a devotional Bible and prayer time each day. Interestingly enough, the program I use is called a "Transformational Journal."

Returning to our text today about not being conformed to this world but being transformed by the renewal of your mind, it is clear we have enough other messages around us saying: fit your life to this, you would look good doing this, this will be really fun. What Paul said about being conformed to this world is just as appropriate today as it was 2000 years ago. One of the ways that we confront all those other demanding messages in our lives is to live with, be conversant, and practice with the message of God in Scripture. Transformation has a Biblical focus.

Transformation takes investment. Paul speaks of presenting our bodies, our total self, as a living sacrifice. His word is sacrifice. Sacrifice is about investment, bodily. Since this is Stewardship Celebration Sunday, I am reminded of the old line about the difference between an offering and a sacrifice. The difference between an offering and sacrifice can be seen in a bacon and egg breakfast...yes, a bacon and egg breakfast. The hen made an offering...the pig made a sacrifice.

Paul speaks of transformation in terms our presenting our bodies, our total self. It is about sacrifice. What a privilege I have to see how people making an investment are transformed in their spiritual journey. I have seen persons become so invested in a ministry of this congregation that they have gone from no attendance or simply Sunday morning attendance to dreaming about their ministry all week long.

For some it has been Stephen Ministry...for others it has been Disciple Bible Study...for some it has been sound and video production for the service...for others it has been teaching Sunday School...for some it has been the Second Sunday at the Center service. For some it is just being around and observing what gets left undone and stepping up to do it.

Here's an absolute: Transformation takes place only as we invest ourselves. It's like dancing the Hokey Pokey. You can put right hand in...your left hand in...your right foot in...your left foot in. But you really have not done the dance until you put your whole self in.

Transformation takes a Biblical focus...an investment of your whole self...and transformation takes time. Yes, I know we live in a 24/7 world, with instantaneous connections with cell phones and emails. Transformation takes time. All too often, we want God in the time like that we get from putting a quarter in the parking meter. Recently, a person gave this classification of Christians in terms of a week:

- No-time of the week Christians: I believe in God and will try to do good when people are looking but just don't have time for church, for service, for learning, for worship
- One-hour a week Christians: got an hour a week unless something better comes along... which it often does.
- Two-hour a week Christians: got an hour for worship and for Sunday School or a committee meeting or a circle.
- Seven day a week Christians: Transforming Christians; have a calling, a mission, a purpose...a daily walk with God.

Which population of Christians is growing? Where do you sense the Spirit of God confronting or confirming where you are?

Transformation takes a Biblical focus...an investment of your whole self...and transformation takes time. Finally, transformation is messy and not always comfortable. Like birthing a child, there is no way to get around making a mess and, even with the best epidural, it sure is not comfortable.

Just last week a member told me that they have approached tithing this year in response to the stewardship campaign. The way they reached that point was by pledging exactly the same as last year. The same pledge even though their family income had dropped nearly 40 percent! Their household income has dropped—forty percent is a lot—but they are making the commitment to hold their pledge at what had been in the past. That is a tremendous increase in their pledge even though they did not change the amount. That is transformation but it was a pretty rough way to get there... it wasn't comfortable.

For the past seven weeks, I have been working on having a visual aid to go with each sermon. One of my new commitments coming out of the four-month sabbatical is the following expression: "We hear what we see." I am going to be the visual aid this morning because I am very aware of being on a transformational journey with you. When I began here 17 years ago, I knew something about preaching and about how to care for people. I did not have much of a clue about working with committees, empowering teams, delegating, church finances, or staff leadership. We did not have any staff to speak of...a couple of part-time musicians, an office person, and me. Our music ministry was sub-par; our youth ministry was sub-par; our adult education was sub-par. We had over a million dollars in debt. I did not go to committee meetings. I spent all my time preparing to preach and doing pastoral care. There would be weeks like this past week: multiple hospitalizations, a death of a long-time member, marital trials, deaths of loved ones that were not members of this congregation, news of cancer or Alzheimers, ongoing trials of mental illness, folks that felt neglected because the pastor had not come to see them, first-time visitors in worship that needed to be contacted, and people who stopped by the office just to talk. Three ministers could not do all that and they do not. Our best ministry is member to member rather than from the "professional" Christians we call pastors.

So about 12 years ago, there was transformation process that took place in me. I began learning how to plan, how lead a staff, how to develop a program, how to run capital campaigns. I

continue to preach but I have gotten farther and farther away from the daily pastoral care issues...that has been messy, painful, but absolutely right. Otherwise, I would simply be playing favorites or oiling the squeakiest wheel.

Today we have mature staff; we have some incredible programs; our total debt is just over a half-million dollars. What is the next transformation? The next transformation for me is to lead us as a church to be a transforming community of transforming individuals. We are not about preserving our rich tradition. We are not about appealing to the next generation. We are not about being dignified. We are about being a community that invites people to be converted: to say, "I am a follower of Jesus Christ." We are about being a community of those converted folks that keep asking the question: how is my life being transformed? How am I presenting my total self? How can I avoid being conformed to this world and transformed? We cannot look to the laws of this land or the general society or our schools to do this transformation. You see, the mission field is just outside our door. The mission field is even inside this congregation. Our mission: transformation into the likeness of Christ in our community life and in our individual lives.

To say I am a Christian means I am about transformation. When we stop transformation, we stop being alive.

Hear again the words of the apostle Paul giving us our missional directions:

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.² 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.