

Transformed to Transform
Romans 12:1-8
July 15, 2018 – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Last Sunday, I spoke of the Mission Statement of the United Methodist Church: “To make and mature disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” I spoke of our call as disciples of Christ to go forth to make more disciples, to spread the Amazing Love of Christ.

But, as I thought about that, I thought: “We can’t transform unless we, ourselves, are transformed.” And so, one of my many favorite scripture verses came to mind:

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. 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 12:1-2*)

Transformation, that means change; and for many people, change is scary. Many of you know that, before entering the ministry, I spent 24 years in Information Technology. During that time, I held most every position that a person could hold, both on the applications side and on the more technical “bits and bytes” side. For several years I worked as a Systems Analyst. In that role, management would tell me, “We have a problem. Our payroll system is too slow, or our accounting system doesn’t give us the information we need, or we believe we’re spending too much on inventory”; and, it was my job to, first analyze the problem or situation and then, working with a team of programmers, design a computer system to solve the problem. Now, I want to tell you, when I walked into the Accounting Department and announced, “We’re going to give you a new computer system,” I was not always met with open arms.

“Change? You want us to change the way we do things? But we’ve always done it this way. We like doing it this way. We don’t want to learn something new. It’s going to create problems. It’s not going to work right. It will be hard to learn. We don’t like change.” Most people find change stressful. So, part of my job was to “sell” the staff on the change, to convince them that it would make life simpler; and to assure them that I would help them through the change.

While I confess that I’ve never thought about it this way before, it seems that Paul is being a Systems Analyst in the twelfth chapter of Romans. Paul is appealing to the readers of his letter to change, to be transformed for the sake of the Gospel. Paul tells us not to be conformed to the world. Friends, the twenty-first century Paul is preaching against a multi-billion dollar marketing industry.

Indeed, most advertisements are based on the concept of “keeping up with the Jones” and if you can even exceed “the Jones” – all the better. Anyone who has ever had children knows the cry: “But everybody does it”; or “everybody has it.” But it’s not just children. How many of us have looked with envy upon the possessions or the activities or the life-style of another? How often do we seek to conform to this world?

But Paul says, “No.” Paul say, put this world aside. Paul says, “It’s time to change, to be transformed.” And how are we transformed? – by the renewing of our minds. That spells education. Last week I spoke against some of the actions of governments, our own and others; and I spoke against some of the actions or, more correctly, inactions of the church. Some of you know that I was disheartened by the failure of certain resolutions at our Annual Conference. Some of the resolutions that failed simply called for further study on the Israel/Palestine situation, in order to decide whether and how to interact with lawmakers. Hear me: they did not call for specific action, only further study. When one such resolution failed, one of my colleagues said to me, “Did we just vote against education?” I responded, “Sadly, I believe we did.”

It was Thomas Jefferson that said that democracy can only survive in an educated society; and I fear that our education is waning. Paul tells us that we must “renew our minds,” for only through the renewal of our minds can we discern “what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Still, as I speak of the actions of both our government and our church, I am reminded that this is not a scripture about “them.” This is a scripture about us – you and me. This is a personal scripture. You and I are called to renew our minds. You and I are called to be transformed. You and I are called to discern the will of God. And change may be as difficult for us as for the next person.

I’m a person that kinda’ likes change... as long as it’s going my way. But, as I said in a sermon a little over a month ago, we all need to do more listening and less talking. Our minds cannot be renewed while our mouths are in motion. And so I pray. I pray that I might be open to understand opinions different than my own, that I might learn from others; as I pray that they might learn from me. But more than that, I pray that I might discern the will of God.

I’ve stated before that I often use one of our responses as a prayer:

Lead me, Lord. Lead me in thy righteousness.
Make thy way plan before my face.

I sing that prayer, not because I love the melody. (It’s okay; but it’s not great.) But I pray it because, more than anything, I want God to direct my life, to lead me, to guide me, to use me for the furtherance of God’s kingdom on this earth.

Paul concludes today's scripture by recognizing that we all have different gifts, given to us in love. (Love – that's the grace part. Remember my definition of *grace*. Grace is God's love for God's people, plain, simple period.) So through grace, through love, God has given us different gifts: prophesy; ministry; teaching; preaching; giving; leading; being compassionate. And so I pray that God will make my gifts clear to me; and that God will lead me, transform me to use my God-given gifts for the furtherance of the kingdom. And I ask, "What gifts has God given you? How will you be transformed? And out of that transformation, how will you contribute to the transformation of the world?"

Now, this is the point when many will say, "Mark, your deluding yourself. We can't change the world." And so I return to my scale of kindness. I haven't mentioned it from some time, and it bears repeating. When someone tells me they can't change the world, I reply, "You don't need to change the world. You only need to change the lives of two people, and change them so completely that they will each go out and change the lives of two people. Now we have six lives changed, the original two and the four that they changed. Then, if each of those four change two lives, now we have fourteen lives totally changed. Well, the additive effect of this is that, in sixteen reiterations of changing lives we will have transformed every person on the planet. We will have shared the Good News of God's Amazing Love with every person in the world. Now, I'm not sure we can literally change every life; but I am convinced that, through the amazing power of Christ, if we are all diligent disciples we can transform the world, we can make the world a better place, we can significantly further God's kingdom on earth.

So, I ask that you pray. Pray that God will show you the way, will lead you in the transformation. Pray that God might lead you to two people who are ripe for transformation, who are anxious to hear the Good News of God's love. Pray for each other, that others will be led in the way of life in Christ. And, please pray for your pastor and your church that together we might further the kingdom in Christ's holy name.

Let us sing our prayer today. It's #473 in your hymnal – "Lead Me, Lord"
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church