

“Transforming Hope”
Sunday, August 23, 2020
Romans 12:1-8
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Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

God’s grace transforms us into people who live in community, connected to each other by hope and in love.

Suddenly, Paul’s words touch a nerve.

Up to this point in Romans, Paul has been playing variations of a single theological theme: the grace of Jesus Christ has saved human beings from the power of sin. He has argued convincingly that we are children of God, set free from the bondage of sin. Christ’s power has brought redemption, even during moments of suffering.

With bold strokes, Paul’s letter has proclaimed a truth to the Romans: a truth that lifts them, shapes them, redeems them. It is a truth that has dared to declare that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul seems to be winding things up, pounding away at the depth, riches, wisdom and knowledge of God. “How unsearchable are God’s judgements and how inscrutable are his ways!,” he proclaims, as the congregation leans forward in anticipation of the ending. They are hanging on his every word as he thunders to what they suppose is his roaring conclusion: “From him and through him and to him are all things. To be the glory forever, Amen!”

You can almost hear the congregation exhaling. But just when the congregation thought this sermon was over – just when they were starting shout their own “Amen’s”, Paul’s voice thunders once more, “THEREFORE!”

“Therefore,” says Paul, I make this appeal to you: present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”

Do what, Paul? Can’t we go back to the grand assurances of nothing ever separating us from God? What happened to the things present, things to come, powers, etc? Couldn’t you have been like every other preacher and end at “Amen?”

Less is more, they think, but it is too late. Paul’s “therefore” has begun slicing deeper into their woundedness. There’s nothing like the word “sacrifice” to get someone’s attention.

Therefore, offer yourselves as a sacrifice.

Suddenly it feels as though Paul is pulling out the fine print, like the guy selling vacation condos. He makes the deal, but then seals it with wordy details no one saw coming.

Therefore, offer yourselves as a sacrifice. This is your work. Don’t be conformed to the expectations of the world, but rather be transformed by learning what it is that God expects of us.

Everything changes as soon as he says “therefore.” There is a new urgency in his voice as he reminds us that God’s grace challenges us to live in new ways. This is what it means to live as God’s people: humbly, relying on each other, building a community of love.

The word sacrifice, said Karl Barth, “always attacks us, like a sharp knife. Barth said those words in 1918, just as another great pandemic was gripping the world. We would much prefer a non-sacrificial religion, says Barth. In his words, “We’d rather serve God in some other way than through sacrifice.”

Sacrifice cuts deep. It calls us to share the burden, and moves us into the center of life. Let’s be honest: sacrifice is hard, and requires effort. We have learned about sacrifices in these past few months, and I’m not just talking about toilet paper, either.

We have discovered that humbly placing a mask on our face is too much for some. We have wrestled with the sacrifices involved with keeping our children in school, or in running a virtual church. And while I have heard more than a few people ask if they could bring their recliners with them when we return to in person worship, I do believe more than a few of us are growing weary of these sacrifices.

More than a hundred years after Karl Barth’s sermon, and we are still wrestling with the notion of sacrifice. Yet Paul makes it clear that worship which is real and satisfying is always about giving up. We give up time and energy to offer our praise. We give up space to welcome those who are unwelcomed elsewhere. We give up the privilege of remaining silent while many speak words of hatred and derision.

This is the pathway which Paul sets before us. He pushes to take the first steps of transformation, turning away from the values espoused by the world, and embracing the holy way God offers.

It’s a pathway that rejects the world’s values, and choose love. It’s a pathway which turns away from self-satisfaction, and chooses Christ. It is a pathway formed by a hope of humility and nurtured by a vision that says that we, though many, are one body in Christ.

It is called a pathway of Christian non-conformity, and it leads to transformation.

Humility is in short supply these days. It takes effort to place our needs above others. Look at the news reports about the coronavirus parties, the crowded college bars, the numbers of people neglecting the best advice regarding Covid-19.

It is not easy to practice the sort of humility espoused by someone like Catherine of Genoa, a nun who cared for victims of the plague in the 15th century. Repulsed by the sores of those she was caring for, Catherine prayed for the strength to reach out in love. Humility is not about denigrating ourselves or giving up our personal freedoms; humility is about choosing to “hate evil, and hold on to what is good.”

Every now and then, that sort of humility peers out from the shadows. Every now and then we catch glimpses of humility, and it is transforming us. It is changing how we interact with the world. A curious thing has happened: while we are all frustrated by the inability to worship together, there is good evidence that the pandemic is transforming us. More people are attending worship, and more people are drawing on their faith.

It is never easy to walk the path of Christian non-conformity, the way of holiness. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr once said that most people “are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority of

opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society.” The call to transform the world becomes a call to be communities where all are welcomed, where love is genuine, mutual affection is offered, hospitality extended to strangers, and we serve the Lord ardently and with zeal. We become a community which draws on the gifts of many.

One of the longest afternoons of my life was a day I spent trying to copy 50 bulletins at a small church in a farming community. I was a student service worker from my college, offering volunteer work in exchange for a scholarship.

The church’s pastor had taken vacation and had left the entire operation—worship, community outreach, youth ministry, office management and plumbing repair – in my extremely green and tender hands. He may have actually regretted that decision later.

Right before he left, he gave me all sorts of instructions, including who to call for help if I had problems printing the bulletins on the old fashioned mimeograph machine. It can be tricky, he said, so don’t hesitate to call Homer if you need help. He’s the one guy who can get this thing to run. Remember, said the pastor, there are many gifts, and not all members have the same function, and Home can fix the mimeograph.

I nodded my head, but told myself I would not be calling Homer. Thursday came and I spent the morning typing the bulletin and getting it set up on the mimeograph. I took lunch and came back to run the 50 or 60 copies needed for Sunday morning. Checking the machine carefully, I pressed the on button. Wheels began turning and finished bulletins began appearing. All was well until the machine was seized by some sort of evil spirit. Suddenly, the machine was spewing ink and shooting out blank sheets of paper across the room.

I tried turning it off and restarting, which only seemed to make things worse.

So I decided to call Homer.

Pretty soon Home drove down to the church in his old truck. He walked in, looked at me, looked at the machine, tinkered with it a bit, and pushed the button. Ten minutes later the bulletins were done. Homer looked at me as if to say, “I thought you were a college boy. What are they teaching you there in that school anyway?”

Paul reminds us: not only from the challenges of mimeograph machines, also from the constraints of thinking more of ourselves than we ought. We are freed, and connected to each other in service and love. We are transformed, with humility and grace and called to use that humility in service. That is our good news. Amen.