

Sermon: *Transformed by the Renewing*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 8.27.23

I'd like to push myself in today's message. Normally I preach on the Gospel and sometimes the Old Testament lesson – they are narrative based and I like the action of the readings; like, Jesus walked, healed and fed five thousand. However, for today, I'd like to take a look at our reading from Romans. It's not narrative based, so it'll be a stretch for me. Additionally, I listen and read a lot of other people's sermons to make me better at what I do. Most, if not all, of the sermons I have reviewed on Romans sound "high and mighty." They are full of pontifications and better-than-thou approaches that are not my style. Yet, there is something in today's message that makes me want to share it.

Let's start with the background of Romans: it was written by Paul (the Apostle, the Saint and the former persecutor of the Church) between 57 and 59 while he was staying in the city of Corinth. This is the next generation of believers, which is to say, that he and his contemporaries didn't walk with Jesus. They know the resurrected Christ. Peter, Andrew, James, the Marys; they got to walk and talk with Jesus. Paul only knows him in the way that we do – in prayer, in faith and, sometimes, in direct revelation. One more thing about Paul, he did not have the New Testament to preach from. It was in the formation of being written. He preached the Good News from the Old Testament. The audience is the Church in Rome. It was not planted, or started, by Paul. He's writing as a guest; but, more than a guest, he's writing and asking for money for a missionary trip to Spain. The Church in Rome was a divided church. Half the participants were of pagan, or "gentile" faith traditions; the other half were of the Jewish faith. Paul identifies with them but he also is the chief evangelist to the gentiles. He walks on both sides of the aisle, if you will. He wrote the letter in a highly sophisticated form of Greek.

Paul wrote: *I appeal to you brothers and sisters by the mercies [lit. compassions] 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.*

It's an appeal, not a command, to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. The Roman world was filled with Greco/Roman images of the perfect body. You've seen the statues, the paintings; you've seen the Olympic Games. "Conforming to the world" in their day meant to lift up the athletic youthful body and, in turn, look down upon the aged body. Paul is making an appeal for them to reverse that thinking. There is a psalm that says we are wonderfully and perfectly made – and that applies to every age, every body style, every DNA combination that God has created. You are wonderfully made. Paul is inviting us to celebrate how we are created and to present our bodies, as they are, as a living sacrifice to God. In other words, come as you are and worship God! You are beautiful just as you are. We can't change our DNA. How we age is how we age; there is very little we can do to change it. We can't change our eye color or our height. It's just as God called it to be. And it's beautiful and wonderful and presenting our bodies is a spiritual worship.

The next sentence indicates what we can change – our mind. You can't change your DNA and many aspects to how the body ages, but, you can be transformed by the renewing of your mind. This is good news. It's not easy, but it's good news.

As we age, our brains develop patterns of thinking; superhighways in the brain, if you will; that make it so we can make quick decisions. The downside is that we get stuck in a rut, in a manner of speaking, by how we think. For instance, I have two different friends that if you mention Bill Clinton to one or George W. Bush to the other, their brains immediately jump into a particular pattern and they say not kind things of the former president. The good news is we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds – we can think new thoughts and it can transform our life.

The rest of this section of Romans will discuss virtues and the benefits of virtuous living. Of all the virtues, Ben Franklin believed that the most important is courage. Paul would disagree; he would say the most important is humility. In fact, it takes a lot of courage to seek humility. It also takes fortitude, prudence and patience to seek humility. But mostly, it takes courage.

Humility is a way to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. Humility asks questions instead of jumping to conclusions. The opposite of biblical humility is pride. Humility is having a genuine openness to the loving kindness God has for you and for everyone else. It's also a life-long process of learning, failing and trying again.

I have seen this play out. At the chaplain's office at the VA Hospital in Palo Alto, where, by the way, there is a large framed poster that reads as follows: *Don't give up, Moses was a basket case too.* [If you were wondering if I was going to mention the Old Testament reading about the birth of Moses, well, here it is. More on Moses next week.] Anyway, at the VA, there was a veteran who was seeking mental health care. Years ago, while he was deployed overseas, his wife, Susan, left him. They went through a hard divorce. And now, whenever he hears the name "Susan" his first inclination is to reach for a drink. He has been working on his recovery and this has become a stumbling block. He met with us that day because there was a critical issue – he has a new regional manager, the one he reports directly to, and her name is Susan. In one week, he was flying to a general manager's meeting where they would meet her. He didn't know if he could go and was wondering if he should quit.

In typical VA fashion, my boss; who I was learning from and sitting in on these sessions (and later given permission from the veteran to share his story); he leaned into the situation. The chaplain said, "What did you do to in your marriage so that your wife left you?" The vet went into a sad story about all the things she did to him. The chaplain said, "I don't see her in this room – it's just you. What did you do to make this situation turn out the way it did?" He then blamed the bottle. That didn't work (of course) so within ten minutes we got to the root of the problem – he valued his work over the relationship. Susan, in an attempt to get his attention, moved out while he was deployed. But, from broken pride, he was the one who insisted on a

divorce and, in many ways, made it bitter out of spite and a broken, and misunderstood, and not-humble heart.

After he made the connection of what his part was in the breaking of the marriage, I saw the veteran go through a transformation with the renewing of his mind. After sobbing on the floor for a few minutes, he composed himself, sat in the chair and said, “It looks like I need to call Susan and ask for forgiveness.”

A few weeks later, he was in the building for a meeting. He looked better; renewed, refreshed. He said that he went to the general manager’s meeting, sat down with his new boss, Susan, and found they have a lot in common. He said this is turning out to be the best managerial relationship he has ever had.

Transformed by the renewing of the mind. We can change our minds. It is our spiritual worship – both in body and in mind. Although our body isn’t getting any younger, God still finds us wonderfully and beautifully made. We resist being conformed to this world by looking down on our bodies as they age and simply, and logically, present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, regardless of our age. Renewing our minds with humility is also our spiritual worship. With asking questions instead of making assumptions. With seeking with an open heart the loving kindness of God for us and for everyone, that is our spiritual worship. And the good news is that we do it through being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.