

Davidson College Presbyterian Church  
Davidson, North Carolina  
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor  
Robert Alexander, Associate Pastor  
Mary Margaret Porter, Parish Associate  
Claire George-Drumheller, Parish Associate  
“A Sermon in Four Voices”  
Romans 12:1-2  
23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
October 23, 2016

(Robert enters from pulpit side door with work clothes - tool box - ladder - etc.)

We've got to make some changes around here! And we're going to start with this baptismal font...I mean – good grief – it's in the way of everything! If we move it over here to the side then we've got this whole space open for all kinds of things – you know – theatrical performances – eye catching displays – stuff that will really entertain and draw people in. If we're going to transform then let's go all out!

I mean – we've got to compete with expensive set designs – and cheering crowds at sporting events – and enormous jumbo-trons! 'Cause it's all about getting people in the pews so they can give their money so we can maintain this great business called the church! The church is - after all a living, breathing organism that needs food to grow and to change. If we're going to be reformed and always reforming...well...we better make some changes!

Yes! The baptismal font needs to be moved. And that's just the beginning to what we'll do in this worship space. There are too many archaic symbols in here that no one understands...and too many words that we use that no one can relate to...and too much music that we listen to or sing that no one connects with anymore. We've got to update and get with the times. If we're going to attract people – we've got to be...well – attractive! We've got to be hip! Modern! Yeah – it's going to cost us – but hey – we're worth it!

Transformation! That's what we need. We've got to transform our worship spaces...we've got to transform our programs...we've got to transform our outreach so that we look good to the world and feel good about ourselves. Then we can show just how blessed we are as God's people. Yes! We've got some changes to make and we can't waste any time!

Wow! That's a lot of change, Robert.

But come to think of it, Paul was concerned about change too.

Paul was all about change.

I don't know what Paul would have thought about jumbotrons! He may have been all for them...

But the change that Paul was talking about, however, was a different kind of change, a different kind of transformation. He was talking about change that is far from superficial. He is talking transformation that profound.

Paul's perspective on transformation came from a very different place than his contemporary world. Paul's world was a world of divisions, a world of insiders and outsiders-Jews and Gentiles, male and female, slave and free. It was a world shaped by hierarchies, with some people on top and others on bottom, some winners and others losers, some honored and others shamed. (1) One might even say that those divisions defined everything in Paul's world—relationships, the economy, the social order—everything.

Jesus came to upend those hierarchies and erase those division, so the change of which Paul speaks in Romans 12 materializes from a very different place. It arises from the God's radical grace, God's mercy, shown in Jesus Christ. And, according to Paul, the mercy of God transforms (metamorphosizes) us so that we are different, unusual, even odd!

In Romans 12, Paul said something that was REALLY radical! Now, remember, in the Greco-Roman culture of his day, there was a sharp division not only among people in the way that I just mentioned. There was a sharp division within people, between their bodies and their spirits. But listen to what Paul wrote: present your bodies as a living sacrifice...which is your spiritual worship.

What Paul is saying is that in Christ there is no division between the sacred and the secular. We are called to full-bodied worship. God's fingerprints are to be on all that we are and on everything that we do.

So....even the things that seem most secular to us are in fact vehicles for our worship of God.

A friend of mine, Lew Thomas, told me a while back about an experience that he had. There was a man in the community where he lived who died. Lew was named in the man's will as the executor of his estate.

(Lawyer and financial advisor friends of mine tell me that you should always ask the person you are naming as the executor of your estate, but, in this case, being named the executor of this person's estate was a complete shock for Lew, but, seeing as how the man had no living relatives, he agreed to do it.)

Lew didn't know the man all that well, really. He was reserved. He lived alone in a mobile home. Lew and he had had occasional friendly conversations of a general nature, but nothing all that personal.

But Lew got to know the man because, well, he got to know the man's checkbook after the man's death as he went through the man's financial records as the executor of his estate. He learned that the man was basically living on Social Security and some small retirement savings. He saw what the man spent for food and for clothes and for gas and for repairs on his mobile home and for upkeep on his one automobile. And he also saw how the man had written regular and generous checks to organizations in the community that fed hungry people and educated children. And he also came to learn that after all his bills were paid, the remainder of his estate was given as a gift to his church.

I heard Lew tell this story when he spoke to the officers of the St. Louis church that I was serving at the time, and, let me tell you, it made a lasting impression on me. Now, every month, when I get a ping on my phone telling me that my Visa statement is ready, I look at it, and I ask myself, "If someone who doesn't know me all that well were to lay eyes on this statement, what would they learn about me? Would they see someone who has been changed, transformed by the mercies of God? Would they see someone for whom the secular arena of money and financial decisions has become a sacred arena for whole and holy sacrificial living? Would they see someone who not only talks the talk, but walks the walk of loving God and neighbor with heart, soul, mind, and strength? Would they see someone who is, well, different, odd even, in the world in which you and I live?"

**But who is going to be attracted to that Lib? If I am different and odd who is going to want to hang around me? If our church is different from the culture how are we going to get people to join us?**

Well, I don't know, Robert.

Maybe that is not the question that Paul, or Jesus, for that matter, would say is the right question to ask.

But on the other hand, I sometimes get pretty jazzed thinking of myself as different or odd! Maybe there are other people who think that way too!

In any case, while I still have a long way to go, asking questions like this has helped me be a lot more honest than I would be otherwise about whether I am presenting my body, that is, my whole self including my financial self, to God as an act of spiritual worship.

1. Charles L. Campbell, "An Odd People," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2002,.

Claire

Robert, sometimes being the church is about being odd and different. Paul charges the church: do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Paul doesn't care if people want to hang out with him; he cares about being *transformed*. In worship and in Christian formation, our minds are renewed; God works in and through us so that we be transformed – so that we might participate in God's work in the world.

We often think of education in this way: we hear a story and remember the facts. But Christian education is even more; Christian education begins with someone telling a Bible story and then asking powerful questions: Can we love as Jesus loved? Does God ask me to be obedient like Abram and Sarai? Who are the sheep Christ calls us to feed? We learn the stories of faith so that our minds might be renewed and so that we might be transformed.

Robert, have you ever heard of the Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber? She's written a few books, and she talks a lot about transformation. In her book *Pastrix*, she tells the story of how she went from being a drug addict and alcoholic to becoming a Lutheran pastor; she tells the story of how she was raised in the church, left the church, and how God brought her back. On Nadia's first date with Matthew, the guy who would become her husband, she asked if he was a unicorn. You see, Nadia was raised in a church where she was taught God's anger and wrath and not God's grace and love. As soon as she got the chance, Nadia left her faith behind. Ten years after leaving the church, she met Matthew, a seminary student training to become a Lutheran pastor. On their first date,

they discussed social issues: racism, homelessness, and women's rights, and Nadia was amazed that they saw eye-to-eye. Nadia left the church because of their judgment and condemnation, but here was a church person she agreed with.

Matthew explained, "Well, my heart for social justice is rooted in my Christian faith." Nadia remembers staring at him, saying nothing. She thought he was a unicorn: a Christian who cares about peace and social justice?! Nadia had never seen such a creature; he was surely a unicorn.

Matthew helped open Nadia's eyes to a new world – a world of Christians who take Matthew 25 seriously; Christians who believe that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick, we do so to Jesus' own self; Christians who do more than memorize the verses, but whose minds are renewed as they ask the powerful questions: what is God calling us to do? Who is God calling us to be? These people aren't magical fantasy creatures, but Christians who have experienced God's transformation through the renewal of their minds. Before I read the scripture passage from Romans, I charged the congregation to listen to God's living breathing word for us today. The Book of Hebrews says God's Word is alive and active. The words of scripture may be ancient and old, but as God's Word, they reveal God to us even now. Being a person of faith is about learning the stories – about hearing the parables and memorizing the psalms; but these "Matthew 25 Christians" don't stop there. Christian education doesn't stop with learning the story and memorizing the verses, but continues on. The stories become part of our identity – part of our DNA. "Matthew 25 Christians" minds are renewed; our whole outlook is changed; our lives are transformed.

Claire - I'm all about transformation - I mean clearly we need transformation - but do you really think these old stories are the way to get there? How can we get to something new by looking at this old stuff? We've got to take the bull by the horns and wrestle it to the ground - not sit in a circle and read stories that were written thousands of years ago!

That's just it, Robert. See, it's not just about looking at all this old stuff, but allowing room for God's transformation. It's not just about telling old stories, but our minds being renewed as we read and study God's Word for the church today. Earlier, you said that the church is reformed and always reforming, but you got the phrasing wrong. The church is reformed and always being reformed by God. Your heart is in the right place wanting to get all this work done around here, but first, we have to allow ourselves to be transformed so that we can do God's work.

Paul tells us, do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds. For DCPC, that may look like going to Sunday School and reading your Bible; joining the youth group and becoming part of UKirk; finding a Bible study and participating in worship. It's all about being transformed by the renewal of our minds. We learn the story in Matthew 25 and we then go! We go feed the hungry; go clothe the naked; go care for the sick. We learn the stories of our faith, ask the powerful questions, and be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

I don't know...this seems so passive...and so reckless! But maybe these stories can change us in the ways that we need to change.

Robert, have you ever gotten to a movie theater late when the movie has already started? You walk in from the brightly lit lobby to a cavernous dark space. Confused you look for open seats but can't really see anything. You trip and spill your popcorn climbing over someone to get a seat. But after a little while sitting in that theater it doesn't seem as dark anymore. You can't see everything - the people around you, even the gum stuck to the seat in front of you. You have become accustomed to the darkness. That is kind of how it is with us. We have lived so long in the darkness of what the world tells us is right and good that we forget what it is like to be in the light of Christ. We move around in the darkness as if it were normal. In fact, bright lights seem too harsh and irritating when compared with the secure darkness. We would rather stay in the dark theater than walk into the harsh bright light outside.

Well this is precisely at the point, when we cannot or don't want to do it ourselves, that the Christian faith reveals itself. What we cannot, or do not do for ourselves or by ourselves, God offers us by God's grace. This very God was made man in Jesus Christ so that we may be transformed from the inside out – this is the grace that allows us to recognize we are in the dark - this is the grace that urges us toward the light – so that we might be transformed from darkness to light - from seeing the world as society tells us is good to seeing the world that God intended for

us. Thus Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians “From now on therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.”

You see Robert, from a human point of view, we will always remain sinners and limited by our humanity: too old, too young, too poor, too busy, too tired, and too sick. But by Christ’s faith we are all made new creations. The scripture says that “everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” But we could include any word here “everything sick has passed away; see, everything has become well,” “everything poor has passed away, see everything has become rich.” The gospel calls all people to participate in this new creation by adopting for oneself the attitudes and actions of Jesus Christ - to see the world in the light of Christ.

**Well - I’m all for that - out with the old and in with the new! We need to bring Jesus into the 21st century and infuse him with a little more modern day culture!**

That’s not really what I mean Robert. You see the new is already here - it is all around us. Christ already made us new creations by his death and resurrection. And this place – this church - holds a unique place in this new creation. God calls us to live as examples of the new age in Christ now in the midst of the old - to point to the light – to shine a light in the darkness.

Almost everything in the church’s worship and life points beyond this life to our new creation in Christ. With Every baptism we participate in, we witness a reenactment of the hope of our living in Christ. Every time we observe Communion, the liturgy helps us look forward to the day of Christ’s return. The gathering of a congregation on Sunday for worship and study demonstrates the love and fellowship that God intends for all creation. The stewardship of our time and treasure testifies to God’s call to love neighbor and anticipates the banquet that awaits us at God’s heavenly table where all are fed. You see, as Christians, we are no longer dominated by the world around us, but we are new creations, guided by the spirit of Christ within us. We have reason to hope because of the change Christ brings about in us and the change we carry into the world.

**Wait a minute - are we talking about the same thing? The old that you are talking about isn’t culture - it’s a way of being - of being in the dark - before we had been welcomed into the light of Christ. Oh...this sounds more like internal transformation than changing buildings and programs.**

Exactly Robert! It’s not the building or the things around us - it IS us. We as Christians are transformed. We are a new creation in Christ. BUT we are called not simply to be content in our transformation. On the contrary, it is our responsibility; to bear witness to our transformation as new creations in Christ. To show others the light - to ourselves be a light in the darkness.

**This doesn’t sound at all like it’s about getting people into the church or about changing how the world sees us. It sounds like it is about letting go of all of that so that the Spirit can truly reveal in us the fullness of God’s will for us. We aren’t the ones who do the transforming work at all...it is God who does the transforming work in us!**

Right! The tools you need aren’t just in that box. Sure we may need to fix things with the sanctuary or try new ways of worship every now and then, but those are only external. The REAL transformation only happens within us. And this place, this church, is at the heart of that - our worship, our service, our education, our stewardship - these are the tools we use to share God’s love - to shine the light of Christ. So Robert, are you ready for THAT kind of change?