

Transformed

Romans 12:1-8

Rev. Eunice T. McGarrahan
Sunday, August 24, 2008
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Many of you may remember Arthur Burns who had a distinguished career as an economist, Chairman of the Federal Reserve and ambassador to West Germany. Dr. Burns, who was Jewish, was invited to offer a prayer at a gathering of evangelicals here in Washington, DC. As reported, this was his prayer: "Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ. And Lord, I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ." Dr. Burns was expressing both a critique and a yearning for those who profess to follow Jesus. If we're honest, it's our critique and yearning as well – we know we don't live as those who profess faith in Jesus, but we want to, because we know it can make all the difference in the world...in the world. Let us pray.

As we gather in this place, O Lord, we know that your gospel has life-changing power. May the power that raised our Lord Jesus from the dead enable us to hear your word so that we begin to take the shape of Jesus. Amen.

There's a huge "therefore" in the first sentence of our text. It's a word that indicates a relationship between things, often a cause and a result. For example, "I love my MacBook Pro, therefore PC users find me insufferable." Or, "The Cubs always find a way to lose, therefore even this National League leading record won't get them to the World Series." (No matter how well they play, we Cubs fans always have two words just on the tips of our tongues – "Oh no!")

Some foundation has been laid before we get to the "therefore," and Paul has laid eleven chapters of foundation. Fortunately, we don't have to go over all eleven chapters, for St. Paul himself laid out a summary in the very beginning of this letter. In chapter 1, verses 16-17, he says this: For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it is the righteousness of God is revealed through faith, for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." Paul will flesh out these assertions, but he is basically saying this: the good news is that God saves us – our lives will be set right by what God does and then we will be able to live that new life by faith.

By the time he gets to the end of chapter 11, he has laid out in detail who we are, why we need saving, how the love of God rescues us and is with us always. So, just before he gets to the "therefore," he very forcefully tells us that we should not ever think that we could give anything to God in order to "buy" God's favor. Everything in our lives comes from God.

Therefore, give yourselves to God. Why? Not to receive salvation, but to say "thank you" for the salvation that has been given. If we value the mercies of God, we will respond to him differently than if we take God's work in our lives for granted. Antiques Roadshow is a popular television program on PBS. People bring stuff from their homes and have it appraised. In his book *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, author Tim Challies refers to an episode in which an elderly man from Tucson, Arizona, brought in an old blanket he had inherited several years ago and which he had just thrown over a rocking chair. He was told that it was a Navajo chief's blanket that had been woven in the 1840s. In wonderful condition, it was one of the oldest, intact Navajo weaves to survive to the twentieth-first century, and certainly one of only a tiny handful to exist outside of museum collections. It was worth somewhere between \$350,000 and \$500,000. The man walked away with the blanket cradled carefully in his arms, security guards on either side of him. He drove straight to a bank, and placed the blanket in a safe deposit box. What had been junk had been instantly transformed into a precious treasure.

Challies goes on to offer this word of connection to the work of God in Christ: "When God saves his

people, bringing us from death to life, he opens our eyes to love and appreciate the supreme treasure that is Jesus Christ."

When we have that kind of love and appreciation for what Christ has done, we want to respond. When we understand the significance of what Jesus has done, we need to respond. Wolfhart Pannenberg, a German theologian gets at this when he talks about the resurrection: he says, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it, except for two things. First, it is an unusual event. And second, if you believed it happened you have to change the way you live.

This is exactly what Paul is asking us to do – to change the way we live by presenting ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. To do this means to put yourself at the disposal of another and to do so as an offering – a gift, without any expectation of return. Now, we present ourselves as living sacrifices all the time – we give ourselves to our careers, our dreams, to others' expectations. But, we often do so because we hope to get something out of it. Often, we end up just hoping that we get out alive.

What we're talking about in presenting ourselves to God is not some kind of negotiation with God to get what we want or need. Paul says that for us to do this is an act of worship. We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices. The body that we give refers to the whole person, not just what is contained within the borders of our skin. We present our whole self – who we are, what we desire, what we have – to the God who gave it all to us in the first place.

When Paul writes this appeal, he doesn't use theological language for worship – he uses secular language. He uses the word from which we get the word "liturgy." That's a theological, church word now, but when Paul used it, he meant to convey the secular and civil sense of the word. If one belonged to a community, then as a citizen you might want to contribute to the well being of the community, so you would perform a liturgy. A liturgy might be paving a section of rough road to enhance travel or providing books for a library. To do a liturgy was to give something back because you belonged to the city in which you lived.

That's why we are told that to give ourselves is our spiritual worship. In many versions, this "spiritual" worship is translated as reasonable, rational or logical. If you go to Revelation 4 and 5, you will find a description of heavenly worship. All the creatures worship. They sing "holy, holy, holy." But the worship of humans is different. The elders gathered around the throne praise God. They also sing "Holy, holy, holy." But they also they give something to God – we observe them casting their crowns before God's throne. Since the crown is a symbol of authority, they are giving themselves, all of themselves, to God.

Unlike the beasts, they have reflected on whom it is they are worshiping and made a thoughtful decision to give control and authority over their lives to their Creator and Savior. It is their 'reasonable worship.' We belong to God and to his people. Our liturgy is to give ourselves to God. We think that the liturgy is what we do here...on Sundays...in this space, but what we do here prepares us for our true worship. All the actions of our time together here should equip us for a life in the world that is tangible worship of God.

But then the question comes to mind: Just exactly how do we present ourselves as living sacrifices to God? What does that worship in the world look like? John Chrysostom, a great preacher of the late 4th Century said this in one of his sermons on this passage:

How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it already has become a sacrifice. Let the tongue say nothing filthy, and it has become an offering. Let your hand do nothing evil, and it has become a whole burnt offering. But even this is not enough, for we must love good works also. The hand must do alms, the mouth must bless those who curse it and the ears must find time to listen to the reading of Scripture. (Homily XX)

What Chrysostom says here reminds of the little song we learned as children: be careful little eyes what you see...be careful little hands what you do...By the way, the Christian rock group Casting Crowns (and now you know why they chose that name) has a great music video entitled Slow Fade, based on this little chorus. It is a powerful and creative expression of the biblical truth that whatever we do, we have an effect in God's world. We can add to the decay of the world around us or we can present our bodies as living sacrifices and add to the glory of God in the world. Chrysostom's themes were taken up almost fourteen

hundred years later by John Wesley. We find a little guide to discipleship in his Three Simple Rules, which, in 18th Century England, transformed people in a world in which the way of Jesus was neither understood or trusted. The rules: do no harm; do good; stay in love with God.

Paul then goes on to tell us the direction in which we need to go if we are to be those living sacrifices. We are not supposed to conform to this world, which is transitory and alienated from God. Ancient commentators translated this as, “don’t fashion yourself after this world.” And they meant fashion just like we do – to shape your life according to the trends of the day. The trends of the day are just that – trends. They shift and change and have little lasting substance.

I was talking about this on Friday with an old friend who doesn’t have much use for church. I said that the Greek word for “conform” is the word from which we get schema, schematic diagrams. I said that we need to be re-wired. Her eyes lit up and she said, “It’s like getting a new motherboard for your computer!” Exactly – she got it!

We need a new motherboard...we need to be re-wired. We need to be transformed. Now, I want you to note this: when we conform, it is our action. The verb in this passage is in the active voice. But when we are transformed (here the verb is in the passive voice), it is what God does in us as Christ lives within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can’t do it ourselves. It’s hard to change – we often change by substituting one bad thing for another. The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous was able to live without alcohol, but he became a chain smoker. Psychiatrist William Glaser, in his book, *Positive Addiction*, says that if addictive personalities seldom change and so our addictions should be positive (exercise) rather than negative (drinking).

We need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. How we think about things affects how we act. I’ve been particularly struck by that while watching the Olympics this year. If you’ve been following, you know how well our basketball team is doing. In the past couple of Olympics they had not been successful. Not only that, there were attitude problems. Let’s face it, their behavior was obnoxious and self-centered. Jerry Colangelo was asked to take on the challenge of remaking the team. According to the commentators, he chose the team based on more than athletic ability. He watched what they did on the court, but he also called them in for interviews. He wanted to know what they thought about being in the Olympics and being part of a national team.

The players had to buy into a selfless defense plan. They had to commit time away from other things in order to practice as a team. And they had to have a sense that they were playing for their country – for something even above the team. For both Colangelo and Coach K, what was going on the players’ minds was essential to the success of the team. Renewing the mind of USA basketball led to a transformation of the team. They did win the gold medal, but more than that, they were a completely different team. It’s very telling that they referred to themselves as the “Redeem Team.”

Scripture speaks a lot about the mind and it makes some pretty bold claims, not the least of which is that we can have the mind of Christ. In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul exhorts us to have the same mind as Jesus. “Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was equal with God, did not consider it something to be exploited, but emptied himself...” That’s the mind that will transform us. Instead of self-centered thinking, our thinking will be Christ-centered and we will be able to offer ourselves to the Lord in ways that are good and pleasing and filled with purpose,

One final thing – the word for transformation here is the same word the gospel writers used when speaking of the Transfiguration of Jesus. In that mountaintop moment, Jesus shone in a glorious light and God’s voice from heaven spoke clearly. For those confused disciples, the Transfiguration was proof that Jesus was the Son of God. Our transformation, by the work of God in us, is proof that we belong to God. That’s pretty serious stuff, but it is the hope we have in Jesus. It is also the desire Jesus has for us as he sends us into a confused world that needs to know its transforming Savior. Amen.