Being Transformed

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
April 27, 2025 AM Sermon
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Romans 12:1-2

When I was 9 years old, I was small and skinny. Really small and really skinny. In fact, I was so small and skinny that when my Mom bought socks for me, my ankles were too skinny to hold the elastics of the socks. As a result, the socks bunched up around my ankles in a heap. Honestly, they wouldn't just bunch up around my ankles; as I walked around during the day the loose socks would slide over my heel and end up in my shoes. I would have to take my shoes off several times during the day to put my socks back on. I was embarrassed about that. My friend's socks didn't do that. I looked at my bunched-up socks. I looked at my skinny ankles and I wished my body was different. I wanted to be bigger and stronger and thicker. I wanted to be transformed.

Now that I'm older, I realize that everybody has those kinds of feelings. Not everyone has ankles so skinny that their socks bunch up in their shoes, but everybody wants to change something about themselves. Everybody looks at themselves and wishes they could be different. Everybody has a deep sense that they could be a better, more confident person if only they could change. The 13-year-old girl looks in the mirror and sees her braces and sees the pimples on her cheeks that won't go away no matter how much she washes and she wishes she could be different. The 14-year-old boy looks at all the other boys in his class whose voices are deepening and whose bodies are starting to look like the bodies of men and he hears his high pitched voice and he sees his boy-like body and he wishes he could be different. We all want transformation.

Maybe 20 years ago, I went to the 90th birthday party of someone in my previous church. We had dinner. We had cake. We had a good time, and at the end, the birthday boy made a speech. He got up front and he said: "I've been taking a hard look at my life and I want you all to know that I promise that I am going to make changes. I am going to become a better person. I am going to change." I remember being really surprised. 90 years old and he still felt like he wasn't finished. 90 years old and he was still looking for transformation. I think every single person here in church this morning has a desire to be transformed. Whether you are an 8-year-old GEM or an 80-year-old elder, we have a sense that we are meant to be more and we're meant to be better.

When you read the Bible you realize that the sense that we are meant to be more and meant to be better comes from God. The Bible tells us, we are meant to be more, we are meant to be better. Not only that, Jesus came to this earth so that we could be more and we could be better. Jesus came to bring us transformation. So, this morning, using this text and the rest of the Bible, I want to talk about the kind of transformation Jesus is bringing to our lives. I want to talk about transformation in three steps. I want to talk about the what of transformation. I want to talk about the where of transformation, where transformation happens, and I want to talk about the how of transformation: What, where and how.

So, first of all, the what of transformation. I said everyone feels like they want to be transformed, like they want to be something better or something different. Not everyone agrees on what that transformation should look like. Not everyone agrees on what better should look like. Sometimes people think that they need to be transformed into a richer person. If only I had more money and more stuff, then I would be happy and fulfilled. Some people think that they need to be transformed into a more beautiful person. If only I had bigger muscles. If only my nose was smaller. If only my hair was blond. If only I was skinnier, then I would be happy and fulfilled. Sometimes people think that transformation looks like becoming more popular. If only everyone liked me and thought I was smart and funny, then I would be happy and fulfilled.

But when the Bible talks about transformation, what does it have in mind? Our passage talks about transformation, what does Romans 12 imagine us transformed into? A rich person? A beautiful person? A popular person? What kind of transformation should we aim at? The 2 verses we read don't really tell us,

but there are other places in Paul's letter to the Romans that tell us. We are supposed to become and like Jesus. In Romans 8 verse 29, Paul says that "those whom God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters." That's a hard sentence. What it's basically saying is that God is making us all to be like Jesus and to be part of his family. God is making us all of us to be like our brother Jesus. God made us to be filled with Jesus' life and filled with Jesus' love. Because that's the transformation that's really life giving. We are made to have the life and love of Jesus fill us. When we are rooted in him, when we are in a relationship with him, we experience real transformation.

That's the 'what.' Now the 'where.' Where does this transformation happen? Not in our head. Not in our brains. It almost sounds like that's what our passage is saying. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." That makes it sound like if you learn all of God's rules and you commit them to your mind, you will be transformed. You will know the right thing to do, and you will do it.

But is that how it works? Do you know that it's wrong to say mean things about another person behind their back? Yes. Do you still say mean things about another person behind their back? Yes, even though you know it's wrong. Do you know that it's wrong to tell a lie? Yes. Do you ever lie? Yes, even though you know it's wrong. Do you know that Jesus tells us not to worry about anything and trust him? Yes. Do you still sometimes worry? Yes, even though you know you're not supposed to. You see, just knowing what's good doesn't make you do what is good. Just knowing what is right in our mind, doesn't make us do what is right.

It's a problem. In fact, that's the problem Paul has been talking about in the whole letter to the Romans. Paul says, we've known God's rules for a long time, God gave us his law ages ago, but they didn't make us do the right thing. We knew the right thing to do, but we did the wrong thing anyway. In chapter 7 Paul says, "I know the right thing to do, I tell myself to do the right thing, but I still do bad stuff!"

The whole message of the book of Romans is that knowing what's right in your brain isn't enough, the change has to come from somewhere else. The change has to come from a deep part of you. That's actually what verse 2 is saying. In the original language (Greek) Paul uses the word 'Nous.' Be transformed by the renewing of your 'nous.' 'Nous' is more than just your brain, your nous is your brain and your passions and your desires and your loves. It's all of those things that need to change if you are going to be transformed.

Just knowing what is right is not enough to get you to do what is right; you've also got to love what is right. You know what this is like… It's like molasses cookies and Lima Beans. I know that I shouldn't eat 4 molasses cookies at night after dinner time. I shouldn't do it because it's not good for me. Too much sugar and fat. But do you know what? When I have them in the house I will sometimes still eat 4 molasses cookies after dinner while I'm watching TV at night because I LOVE molasses cookies. They are so yummy. They are the best. You know what I never eat after dinner while I'm watching TV? Lima beans. I've never done that. Not one Lima bean in my whole life. You know why? I HATE Lima beans. They are yucky.

What if, for me, following God's will was like eating molasses cookies, and what if doing bad things was like eating lima beans? What if I loved doing what was right as much as I loved molasses cookies, and what if I hated doing bad things as much hated eating Lima beans? I'll tell you what would happen: I would do good things all the time and it would be easy. I wouldn't have to force myself to do good. I wouldn't have to work at not doing bad because my heart would have been renewed. When your heart is renewed, everything changes. When your heart is renewed, you are transformed. Where does the transformation happen? In the deep part of you, in the place of your loves, in your heart.

So that's the where, what about the how. How does this transformation happen? Because we all want it. Don't you want to be the kind of person where you are so in love with doing what's right and good just comes naturally to you? I do. But how can I become that kind of person? The answer is maybe not what you think. There is a famous minister in the last century named Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and he used to say this. He said when he wanted to know where someone was spiritually, if he wanted to know the state of their heart, he would do this. He would go to the person and say, "Let me ask you, are you a Christian?" And if the person

said, “I am trying to be,” he knew they didn’t understand how to become a new person. They didn’t understand how transformation worked.

Does that surprise you? I think Lloyd-Jones is right. Real transformation comes by changing the deep part of you, by changing your heart, by changing what you love. But you can’t change your heart and what you love just by trying. The only person who can change your heart, the only person who can change what you love, the only person who can transform that deep, deep part of you is Jesus.

That’s what our passage says. Paul doesn’t say, “transform yourself by the renewing of your mind.” That would be Paul telling you to change yourself. Paul says, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” That means someone else is transforming you. You aren’t transforming yourself; you are being transformed by someone else, and that someone is Jesus.

Jesus came to this world to transform it and one of the things he is transforming is your heart. He died on the cross to wash the sins from your heart. He rose from the dead to set your heart free from the power of death. He sent his Holy Spirit into your heart so that that Spirit could gradually teach you to love what he loves. This is already happening. You are already being transformed. You already belong to Jesus. You are already his child. He already loves you more than you can imagine and His Spirit is moving in you and changing you. All you need to do is what Paul says in verse 1 of our passage: offer your body as a living sacrifice, give yourself over to this goodness, this grace, this mercy that he is pouring into your life. Jesus knows you better than anyone. Jesus loves you better than anyone. Jesus is working in you to make you a new person. Don’t fight that! Give yourself to that. Let that life fill you.

Sometimes letting that life fill every part of your life will feel a little like trying, but it’s a different kind of trying. It’s the difference between rowing and sailing. If you have to get across a lake, you can row or you can sail. When you row, all the energy and success of the trip depends on the power of your trying. It’s you against the wind and the waves. Good luck. I hope your arms are strong. I hope your back is sturdy. Because if you’re rowing it all depends on you. But sailing is different. In sailing the power is from the wind. The wind is what moves you along. A sailor’s job is to discern the wind, pay close attention to the wind. And then you put up sails that the wind fills and pushes you along.

That’s how transformation goes with God. The wind of the Holy Spirit is what moves us and changes us. We sailors still have lots to do. We have to discern the wind moment by moment. Where is it blowing? Where is it pushing us? Then we send up sails to catch the wind. We send up the sail of worship. We hoist the sail of Bible reading and study. We unfurl the mainsail of prayer. We let out the spinnaker of fellowship and mutual care. When it comes to transformation we are not just sitting there; we have lots to do. But it’s the Spirit of God and the power of God that does the heavy work.

What is biblical transformation? It’s having the life of Christ in us. Where does that change happen? In the deepest part of you, your passions and loves. How does the change happen? Through the power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Happy Sailing everyone. May the Spirit carry you all the way home. ©Rev. Peter Jonker