

BE TRANSFORMED
Romans 12:1-8

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Avon Lake UCC
23 August 2020
(online worship only)

If the only gospel we had was the gospel of John, our celebration of Christmas would be very different. There would be no angels decorating Christmas cards or singing “Gloria”. There would be no babies in swaddling clothes adorning nativity scenes, no shepherds dressed in bathrobes for Christmas pageants. Luke and Matthew give us all of those beloved details. They give us the stable, the star, the magi.

John explains the coming of the Christ into the world in this way: “In the beginning was the **Word**, and the Word was with God and the Word **was** God.”

I’m awfully glad we have the birth narratives in Luke and Matthew, but I also love the beginning of the gospel of John which reminds us of the power of words.

In one of the creation stories in Genesis, it is God’s word which brings the world into being. “Let there be light”, and there was light.

I have been noticing the words that people are using to describe their lives in these days. Living during a pandemic is hard for everyone, but different people choose to respond in different ways. Some are looking for people to blame, some people’s default is complaining. Some people are focused outward, concerned about others, about those whose losses have been severe.

In our back deck conversations, I have been asking people to identify what has been most challenging for them, and also to think about something good that has come out of this experience. There are very few experiences in life, even extremely tragic

ones, that don't come with some sort of positive side effect, some small blessing that is worth noticing and appreciating.

I am by nature an optimistic person. It is not hard for me to see the glass half-full, and to look for the good in every situation. And I'm not usually a worrier. But even I am concerned as we go into the fall and winter months with coronavirus still very much with us. It was one thing to face a different way of life as the days were getting longer, and we have enjoyed a beautiful summer here. But we all know that winter can be pretty gloomy in northeast Ohio. So I have been thinking a lot about how we can help each other prepare. How can the church help those who may be struggling with depression, anxiety, maintaining sobriety and living with strained relationships?

In our reading for today, Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Paul knows what modern psychology has now proven: that **WE DO HAVE CHOICES** about how we respond to any event. We can't control every thought, but with practice, we can train our minds. We can be more aware of the words we are saying to ourselves and the impact they have.

We know the power of words. Perhaps you know the pain of someone telling you, when you were a child, "You'll never be good at school" or "Why do you have to be so clumsy?" Words that confined you and defined you. And perhaps you know how empowering it was when someone saw a gift in you and encouraged you. Words like, "I hope you pursue music in some way; you have a natural talent." Or, "You are an exceptionally kind person; the world is lucky to have you."

The words we say to **OURSELVES**, especially as we repeat them, begin to change us. If you constantly say, "I'm so stupid" under your breath, pretty soon you'll

start to believe it. You may think you're just talking...but those words, they can sink in. It is the **opposite** of the renewal of the mind which Paul describes.

How can we renew our minds in a way that will prepare us for living under the COVID shadow for several more months? How can we train our minds to think about what we might learn and experience during this unusual time? How can we prepare ourselves mentally, emotionally and spiritually so that we will not only survive but use this time in a productive way?

Last week I talked to one of our members who lives alone. She has attentive relatives nearby, but there's still plenty of time during the day when she's all by herself. She said, "Sometimes I find myself getting depressed, and I then I catch myself and start talking myself out of it. I start thinking about the blessings of my life and try my best to turn around my attitude."

Let me stop for a moment and say that it isn't always possible to talk yourself out of feelings of depression. We all feel down and blah from time to time, and that is what this parishioner was expressing. If you are exhibiting signs of depression - difficulty functioning, change in your eating and sleep patterns - please reach out to your doctor for help.

But many of us **CAN** learn from our friend who practices the renewing of her mind - turning her thoughts in a more positive healthy direction.

Here's one upside to the moment we're in. We know, ahead of time, what to expect. We've been living with this for several months already. Most life crises take us by surprise. This one is utterly predictable, and we have time - which, if we're smart, we'll use. Let me propose some practical steps we can all take to prepare ourselves.

1. Put a support system in place. Who are the people you can talk to on the phone, maybe FaceTime or zoom with? Before the weather turns, maybe you can take walks with these people or gather outdoors. Is this the time to ask for a relationship with a Stephen Minister? Or do a check-in with a professional counselor? I know this. This is **NO** time to try to live like a lone ranger. Compile a list of the people in your life who will support you, people you won't be afraid to turn to when you're having a bad day.

2. What are the healthy activities you can engage in over the winter months, things you will look forward to and enjoy? Begin putting together a playlist of music that always lifts your spirits. Think of something new you want to learn. Some of our normal outlets aren't going to be around this year. I know in my home we have been engaging in grieving rituals over the loss of Ohio State football.

This winter we probably won't be going to events, plays and concerts. Are we going to sit around and complain about what we're missing, or are we going to renew our minds and transform ourselves into people with new interests, new hobbies? Is there a corner of your home you can claim for yourself as a space where you can go to feel comforted, a place to read a favorite book? If you start now, you can develop a plan.

I loved hearing the answers to my question, "What good has come out of this?" on the back deck last week. I heard, "I've walked more, I've read more, I've prayed more." One woman who'd always wanted to try paddle boarding has been out on a small calm lake nearly every weekend.

3. Start writing down a list of encouraging messages you can give yourself. Write them on index cards or sticky notes, stick them on the dashboard of your car, your

computer screen, or your bathroom mirror. Affirmations from the Bible like, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Or “I can do hard things.” “I am strong and courageous.” Maybe you think it sounds like dopey advice from a self-help book, but what would it hurt to try? None of us has lived through a pandemic before. There’s absolutely no harm in preparing, even overly-preparing.

“Don’t be conformed to the practices of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

Don’t let coronavirus take away your sense of agency over your own life.

So far, we’ve talked about how we can show compassion towards ourselves, which is absolutely essential and appropriate. This is like the speech they give at the beginning of every flight - “put your own oxygen mask on first.”

But the Bible never leaves us with self-care. It challenges us to act with love towards others, especially those most vulnerable in this time.

When Paul wrote, “Don’t be conformed to this world,” he meant that the church is, at its essence, a countercultural alternative community. The values of the world in which Paul lived were not Christian values. He lived under the thumb of the Roman Empire. Rome was violent, militaristic and greedy. If you were born poor, you’d die poor; there were scarce opportunities to improve your life. The Christian charity Paul wrote about so eloquently was laughed at by Roman authorities.

What about us? We live in a world that worships wealth and celebrity, where poor people are often blamed for their status, where people who are different are looked at with suspicion. We too are immersed in violence, which now includes violence to planet Earth itself. “Do not be conformed to this world,” Paul says. Stand beside it,

rather, as a loving critic. We are called to be accountable to one another, living in an open-minded, open hearted way. Not growing complacent, but finding a way to make a difference.

This is Millard Fuller. He began his life conforming to the values of this world, and things were going very well for him. He graduated from Auburn University and the University of Alabama law school. While still in school, he and a friend started a business. Fuller was a millionaire by the age of 29, and this was in 1964. But as his business prospered, his health, integrity and marriage all suffered. These crises prompted Fuller to re-evaluate his values and direction. He and his wife renewed their marriage vows. He became a committed Christian. And then — well, let me just say it's risky to start reading the Bible and taking it seriously — then Millard and Linda Fuller decided to sell everything they owned, give the money to the poor, and look for a new focus for their lives. They ended up in a Christian community in southern Georgia, with other people who were looking for a practical way to live their discipleship values.

They began building affordable homes for people with low income, on a no-profit, no-interest basis. Homeowner families were expected to invest their own labor into the building of their home and the houses of other families. This reduced the cost of the house, increased the pride of ownership and fostered the development of positive relationships. Money for building went into a revolving fund, enabling the building of even more homes. In 1973, Fuller moved to Africa with his wife and four children to test this housing model. The housing project they began there was so successful that Fuller became convinced the model could be expanded and applied all over the world.

Upon his return to the United States in 1976, Fuller met with a group of close associates. They decided to create an independent, non-profit organization that would apply this new housing model, and Habitat for Humanity was born. The ministry the Fullers founded has an economic philosophy based upon what Fuller calls the “economics of Jesus.” Habitat for Humanity has helped more than **29 million people** construct, rehabilitate or preserve homes since its founding in 1976.

All because one person decided to no longer conform to the values of this world but to allow himself to be transformed by the renewing of his mind.

Our world is trying to tell us that people are poor because they're lazy. Do not be conformed to that way of thinking. Be transformed. Be empathetic and believe that people of good will can make a difference as we partner together.

Our world is trying to tell us that we'll be happy if we think of our own comfort and pleasure. Do not be conformed to that way of thinking. Be transformed. Believe that it is service to others that gives life its deepest joy.

Our world is trying to tell us that we should stay far away from people who think differently than we do. Do not be conformed to that way of thinking. Be transformed. Find someone with whom you disagree and listen to their life story. It might open your heart.

Our world is trying to tell us that we can't really do anything about gun violence or climate change - those problems are just too big, too complicated. Do not be

conformed to that way of thinking. Be transformed. Follow your passion and get involved in the issue that moves you the most.

We could limp along and survive until things return to normal. Or we can choose to live in this time with as much energy and enthusiasm as possible, determined that we can do **better** than normal, that we want to work with God to create a world we will all **want** to return to, a world where justice and peace are seeds that are planted and growing.

The conclusion of the first part of chapter 1 in John's gospel gives us these words that we remember every year when we light our Christmas Eve candles: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome the light." They are words to live by.