

**Sermon Title: “Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Minds”**

**Worship text: Romans 12:1-13**

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“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

There are two words I want to focus on here. One is the word “transformed.” In Greek, the word is *metamorpho*, where we get the word metamorphosis. It means to be completely changed from one form into another.

And what causes this change? Paul says it’s the “renewing of your mind.”

What does this mean, the renewing of your mind? The Greek word for renewing here means “renovation.” It means to be completely changed for the better.

As I was walking through the airport, I saw signs in an area that was being renovated. “Pardon our Dust.” “Under Construction.” It was messy and dirty and noisy. But the signs contained a promise: “We’re Making Improvements for You.”

So, Paul tells us that the change God is making in you, in us, starts with the way you’re thinking about things. Why is this so important, for God to change people’s minds and renovate their thinking?

I’ll tell you why. Because the members of the Roman church were constantly bombarded with messages and propaganda from the Roman Empire to make them compliant with their own oppression. They lived in fear of a ruler who they believed had god-like power. And their minds, their thinking about this construction of reality needed to be transformed.

Let’s take a moment to lift our eyes beyond the pages of the text to look around at the world in which Paul was writing.

What was it like to live under Roman imperial occupation of the Mediterranean world at the time Paul wrote this Letter to the Romans? Everywhere you looked in Roman art and architecture, even on their coins you saw the same kinds of messages.

Roman architecture was comprised of temples and the Colosseum, with huge arches, columns, and domes. The gargantuan buildings symbolized their intent to impose their will upon the land and upon the people. The myth of Pax Romana convinced people that the only way for peace was through violence.

Their massive altars and monuments depicted military victories and domination of the very elements of earth itself. All of it was a manifestation of hierarchy, dominance, and nationalism. They wanted to Make Rome Great Again, concentrate their power, consolidate their identity.

The Pax Romana, which supposedly ensured tranquility and abundance, *was built on military victories as well as on the personal charisma of Jupiter’s representative on earth.*<sup>1</sup> In other words, the emperor as god’s “son” ushers in peace through violence. And he can do it because he’s believed to be divine. The divine right of kings who enjoy immunity in his “official acts.”

But Paul knows the truth behind this state propaganda. He knows that Pax Romana is, in fact, no peace at all. It is merely a mask hiding untold suffering through violence, rape, subjugation, humiliation, and forced servitude of conquered and colonized peoples.

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<sup>1</sup> Kleiner, 71, emphasis mine.

The biblical scholar Robert Jewett stresses that Paul is doing something very different from the Roman propaganda machine. The Romans push the idea of a magical new world ushered in by a triumphant leader. In contrast, says Jewett, "the avenue of divine action [for Paul] is the conversion of humans [from within] rather than their colonization under a ruler pretending to be a god."<sup>2</sup> Conversion – the metamorphosis of the human mind – is the goal of this divine action, which Romans 8 tells us that all of creation awaits with eager longing. Even Earth itself awaits our transformation.

This is why Paul tells them, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Paul is showing them a different social structure – one that God wanted for them. Because God did not want a hierarchy.

But more than that, when Paul tells his congregation not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, this is not just an admonition for them to be humble. No, he is implicitly critiquing the hierarchy of Rome, and especially the emperor, who believes he has godlike power.

Paul goes on to say, "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." These are our priorities for Christian living.

When he tells them to think of themselves as a body with many members and that we are one body in Christ, he is telling them that their identity and purpose is not determined by Rome. You are more than a cog in the wheel of Rome's military-industrial complex. So, be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Imagine a different future. Dream bigger dreams than the narrative of dominance that Rome has imposed upon you and your people.

You see, this diversity of gifts is part of God's plan. Always has been, always will be. Without diversity, what do you have? You have **monoculture**.

This is a practice in agriculture where you only grow a single crop. It maximizes efficiency. It simplifies cultivation and harvesting. But monoculture depletes the soil of nutrients, and requires massive amounts of artificial fertilizer which poisons the ground and water.

And yet, this is what today's Christian Nationalists want for humanity – the equivalent of monoculture in society. One superior race (white), one superior gender (male). The autocrat is at the top, a position believed to be ordained by God. And enabled by the minions who enjoy the benefits of being in proximity to power. Just like in Rome, everyone is supposed to know their place in this system. And this hierarchy is enforced by a common language (English), culture ("American"), religion (Christianity), and violence.

But Paul is very clear that this is not what God wants. **Diversity is God's will for humanity.** Diversity of culture is what helps us survive as a species, just like biodiversity helps ecosystems to survive and thrive. Just like the diversity of gifts that Paul mentioned helps the church survive and thrive. Our diversity of languages, genders, sexual orientations, races, cultures, body types – all of this is a gift from God.

So, when we hear voices in our own time insisting that there must be only one language, one culture, one hierarchy -- we must call this out for what it is. Today it's known as rightwing extremism, or protectionism, or colonialism, and, yes, fascism. And it is NOT God's will for humanity.

Paul is telling the church in Rome that God is trying to transform their minds so that they can be released from Rome's oppressive grip. You don't need to participate in your own oppression, he tells them. Our diversity is our strength. Diversity is a gift given to us from God because it is within the very nature of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Jewett, 512.

This week, you are going to have a chance to think deeply about who God is calling you to be in this great metamorphosis. In verses 4 – 8, Paul gives them examples of the gifts they might discover within themselves.

Some are prophetic truth-tellers who can write and speak and publicly confront the powerful leaders.

Others feel called to work behind the scenes offering encouraging words and care.

Still others are best suited for teaching, fighting back against book bans and the silencing of the history of racial oppression.

Some may discover that they have a gift for building bridges of understanding and healing relationships in our divided world.

There are others who have the financial means to provide what is needed for the struggle to stand firm against authoritarianism.

And for those who are leaders in churches, especially clergy, Paul has a special word for you: diligence. It means to be earnest, forthright, careful, and persistent. We're going to talk about that in our sessions together, what diligence for this time means for our preaching.

Because this is an all-hand-on-deck moment for the ICCC, for the good people of this nation, and even the world, which is being subjected to Romanesque authoritarian propaganda every single minute of the day.

But Paul is very clear here: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." These are our priorities for Christian living.

As Christians, we need to hate what is evil. We need to love what is good. We need to speak truth to power. We need to link arms and stand up to the legislators, the CEOs, the governors who ban books and bodies and history and rights.

And, for those of us who preach, we have a specific responsibility to push back on the ones who use the Bible and theology to justify their imposition of hierarchy and violence.

Fortunately, we have the stories and teachings within this Bible to fight back against this false gospel that God wants a nation of a single, pure, race, language, and religion. Because the resurrection of Christ started the greatest transformation through the renewing of minds that we have ever seen. It's still happening. It's going to happen here this week. It's going to happen in your churches back home.

Our renovation might be messy and dirty and noisy as we are "Under Construction." But God's sign contains the promise: "We're Making Improvements for You." For your community. For the planet. For generations who follow us. God is making that transformation in us.

Thanks be to God!