

Renewing of Your Mind

Rev. Nicole Farley

First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha

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Romans 12:1-8

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do 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.

³ 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 judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ ¹⁴And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ¹⁵He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

For any of you who have been following Peter in the readings of the church year, you might recognize that this is *his* moment. Most of the times we read about Peter, he is bumbling and clueless but, in today’s reading, he gets it! When Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?” he responds: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” He hits the nail on the head. What is it that sets this time apart? After all, seven verses later, Jesus tells him, “Get behind me, Satan!” when Peter responds that Jesus cannot be meant to die. What happens in verse 16 that is so different? Jesus says, “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” What Peter spoke was not his own idea but a revelation from God. Peter became a conduit. So how can this verse apply to us? We are not the rock upon which the church is founded.

And yet, like Peter, we can be clueless much of the time. What’s to say we, too, don’t have a chance of understanding, really understanding, God? The fact is, sometimes we click, sometimes we’re firing on all cylinders. “Yes, but when it comes to faith,” you may think, “I’m not good enough, I’m not church-y enough, I’m not a good enough Christian. My faith is too small, my belief is too uncertain, my

attendance too spotty, my commitment too tentative.” In reply, I would offer a saying: “If you think you’re too small to have an impact, try going to sleep with a mosquito in the room.” God picked Peter and God has picked you for something special. So if you’re not insignificant, why might it feel you haven’t had many, if any, revelations?

Just like Peter, our minds get cluttered with thoughts about ourselves. Just as Peter didn’t want his friend to die, we don’t want change, we want things to stay the way they have been, we want to be in control of our own lives and the things that happen to us. But Paul admonishes the Christians in Rome, and us, saying, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” If our minds are full of worldly thoughts, there is no room for Godly thoughts. Our struggle to hold onto what is normal makes me think of monkey traps in Asia. Hunters make a simple trap with slats or a hole narrow enough that a monkey can get its paw into the trap to reach the banana or rice or other bait but, as soon as the monkey tries to pull its paw out, it finds the paw clenched around bait is too big to pull out of the trap. Rather than give up the bait, the monkey sacrifices its freedom, easily being caught while it continues to struggle to remove the bait. If our hands are full grasping at the small things we think matter, we miss the bigger things around us that matter more. If our brains are full of the small details that do not matter in the long run, we miss sight of the big things that surround us. Things like God revealing God’s self.

So, we need to renew our minds, to make them new again. Like the junk drawers in our homes, we can’t just clear them once; there is some gravitational pull that brings the junk back. It’s not always the same junk but it’s still junk. So we need to keep renewing our minds. We need to keep hitting the reset button when we realize our minds are getting filled with worldly tedium. How do we do that? There’s no one answer. For some, meditation quiets the mind. For others being in nature tunes out the rest of the world. A solution for believers for centuries has been prayer. And, for others, immersing oneself in work for another is a means.

I’ve been on over a dozen mission trips, with youth and with adults. I was in the area affected by Katrina just two months later and then again a year later, first helping muck out homes and then helping with the rebuilding. I’ve worked on trailers in Appalachia, adding wheelchair ramps for people recently disabled and replacing rotting decks which served as the only means of exit and entrance. I’ve built an outbuilding that served as a food pantry run by those who have little for those who have even less. I’ve worked side-by-side with Cuban brothers and sisters in maintaining their church buildings. For those trips that took place before I went to seminary, I took time off from work to go and I would often be asked when I returned if I had a relaxing time, as if having been on vacation. The truth was, I had done more physical labor in that time off than I had ever done at my desk job. Relaxing definitely was not the

word for my time away. And yet, somehow, despite dropping in bed each night and waking up earlier than I did for work, I found a new energy. I found renewal.

In the New Orleans area, I was re-minded how to be grateful for the most basic necessities, like running water and a stove that wasn't a camp stove. In Appalachia, I was re-minded how very lucky I am and have been to live where I live with the shelter I have and surrounded by the "stuff" that I have come to take for granted. In Cuba, well, I was re-minded that life is easy in the United States, even if one is born into one of our poorest areas. And the one thing I found in all those places on all those trips was a resilience and a hope that came out of a trust that God was present. Where I might have been hoping for God to help in some tangible way, in a way that felt like a wave of a magical wand, God's presence, God's company in such difficult times was enough for these people. With God, they could face anything.

My mind, my way of seeing the world, my idea of waiting on God and recognizing God was renewed. I had seen people living in circumstances which would leave me asking God, "Why me?" and those people were full of a joy in life I had not felt. They were full of a type of gratitude to God which I had not expressed. I am convinced that in every case, having less stuff made more room for God. With less time focused on the worldly things like knickknacks and auto maintenance and the ability to walk into a store and buy whatever it was you wanted whenever the mood struck, more time was focused on what really matters - families, friends, faith. Just like that junk drawer, I had made space in my mind for that realization, for that recognition, to stay but eventually the junk of the world filled it back in. It is so easy to be conformed to this world and all its stuff. And so, each trip provided me with a renewal of my mind and a reorienting toward God and the plenty which God provides.

Paul calls us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, by the reorienting of our compasses back to God. Why? So we may discern what is the will of God, discern what is good and acceptable and perfect. Good, not great; acceptable, whose synonyms are adequate, passable, satisfactory, not abundant or top of the line. So we might see where the line is between enough and more than enough and share what we do not need. So we might consider ourselves beyond fortunate that our lives are great compared to the lives of 99% of the rest of the world, so that we might show gratitude, so that we might work to even the balance in humble recognition that we could do without our so-called necessities so that someone could instead have enough food, shelter, medicine.

You may leave here today feeling a call to do something differently. Good! The trick is and will always be to hold onto that feeling. And it *is* a trick, for we would deceive ourselves to think that we could. Instead of trying to foolishly hold onto that one reminder, commit yourself to being alert to the reminders that surround us every day so that you might strive to one day be renewed every day, might

always be attuned to what is good and acceptable and perfect. And, in this way, might *you* become a living sacrifice, ever mindful of the excesses, ever trying to stay in balance, ever trying to love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Worship is not only a place where you can go on Sundays; it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a way of being, a way of living which is good and acceptable and perfect.

When you re-new your minds and reorient your lives and make space in your junk drawer of a mind, God's revelations are there. For you see, God's revelations are around us all the time if we only have the eyes to see with minds that are looking. Find what renews you. Discover whether it is one or many different ways. And then be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Let us pray: Lord, help us to continually find ways to be transformed out of our conformity. Awaken us from complacency and ingratitude. Renew our minds. Amen