

“Be transformed”

Romans 12:1-8

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

A key word in Paul’s letters is the word “therefore.”

Our Romans text for today starts out: “I appeal to you therefore, . . .”

This is Romans 12:1. And he uses this word “therefore” also 2:1, 5:1, and 8:1. Watch out for it because it means something then happens.

In Romans 12:1 the “therefore” signals a turn to what this all means for the Christian life. What does it mean for what we do, how we live? He then writes: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice [and] do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your minds . . .”

That’s not very helpful because that’s not very concrete. What concretely does it mean to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice”?

What concretely does it mean not to be conformed to this world but “be transformed”?

Today, therefore, let’s take up what this is about. In order to do that it is necessary first to clear away some brush and say what we do normally.

Normally, we say: “Well, the Bible says.” And it’s true. The Bible says a lot of things. We say the Bible tells us how to live. How do we use it?

For example, the Old Testament is very clear about not eating pork. But we don’t worry about following that rule today.

Then we say: What really matters is the Ten Commandments. But that’s not so simple either. The Third Commandment is very clear about keeping the Sabbath, and the Sabbath is Saturday. But we don’t do that. We don’t worship on Saturday, even though the Third Commandment says to do this. Over the course of three hundred years the church changed to worshipping on the Saturday to worshipping Sunday, the day of the resurrection. And that change was controversial, even at the Reformation.

What about the other Commandments? What about “thou shall not steal”? In California there has been a law that you can steal up to \$900 worth of stuff without being prosecuted. Stores were looted, destroyed. It didn’t work out well, and that permission to steal has recently been repealed.

And what about Commandments 9 and 10 about coveting and the problem today with squatters? They not only feel envious and entitled to what others have, they squat on others' property, taking it for themselves, a sign of a civilization in decline.

Human nature being what it is, laws and boundaries are needed to protect private property and life.

And the problem isn't just the looters and the squatters. Luther writes famously that the whole law is summed up in the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods."

We protest: "I don't have any idols." But human nature being what it is, our hearts are idol-making machines, and we are adept at loving ourselves, at judging ourselves more virtuous than others, and yet, none of us loves God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

When we face problems using the Old Testament, normally, we then say: "Let's move to the New Testament."

There are many places in the New Testament which tell us how we should live. 1 Cor 11:2-16 says that women should not be in church without having their heads covered. Yet I don't see any veils or hats today.

We say: "That's something that was local and for that time." And we set ourselves as judges and lords of what is temporal and what is eternal.

Or some will then say: "Well, the Holy Spirit leads us." Yet Christians have had a terrible time confusing the Holy Spirit and our spirits. We end up following whatever seems right to us and our feelings.

Then what? Normally, what we then do is say: "Well, not that. But there are the key things, the big things, like forgiving people 70 X 7" (Matthew 18:21-22). That's what a Christian does.

But even that doesn't work very well when you come down to it. You can easily get caught in a situation with someone who is manipulative and narcissistic. When you endlessly forgive, then you are an enabler of bad behavior and part of the problem.

We know the Bible says we live by love. That comes out in a few places, both in the Old Testament and the New. Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19). It is a kind of rule about how you live. You know how you want to be treated. Treat others that way.

In Romans 13:8-10 Paul lists a few of the Ten Commandments and then says the whole law can be summed up in one sentence: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:9). And what is love but not doing harm to your neighbor.

The Christian way is like the ancient axiom, the Hippocratic Oath: “First, do no harm.”

It’s also like modern axiom, “Chesterton’s Fence,” (G. K. Chesterton), a cautionary reminder not to tear down a fence before you know why it was put up in the first place. It goes like this: The naïve do-gooder comes to a fence and says: “I don’t see the use of this fence. Let’s tear it down.” The wiser person asks: “Why was this fence was put up in the first place?” Human nature being what it is.

To be sure, the original reason might not have been a good one, and even if it was, things might have changed. On the other hand, it may be that this fence is still needed and taking it down would be like letting the wolves in to devour the sheep.

Human nature being what it is, fences are needed. They are a holding operation in a fallen world.

When we are tempted to sit the sidelines, letting others tend the fences, we find we’re judged there, too. The Bible makes it clear there are sins of omission which are just as serious as sins of commission.

To sum it up: There is no neutral place to stand.

And what it’s really about is that we are totally saved by our Lord Jesus Christ. He does it. He does it because we can’t. He did it all on the cross. Then we belong to him. He continues through the Holy Spirit to do these things that are his purpose.

“Be transformed.” It’s not about works and merit. It’s about being his. “Underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27).

And remember it’s all hidden. That’s what the life of faith is about. A life hidden under the cross. And there’s a good reason for that which we’ll come to in a moment.

How do we live? What do we do? Because Luther also says very clearly that we are not saved by works, but those who are saved will do good works. They will be concerned about fences; they will be tenders of fences.

We are then able to go back to those things about love that we mentioned earlier. You know how you’d like to be treated. That’s how we’re called upon to treat others. These are common principles found not only in Judaism and Christianity, but also in other religious and civil codes. We use reason and common sense to protect life and keep evil at bay.

At the same time, when it comes to salvation, to ultimate matters, then reason is useless. It can’t help us at all. Only the cross does that, and it’s a stumbling block, a scandal (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Be transformed. It's not about works and merit; it's about being his and living in his two kingdoms. There's Christ's future kingdom, his right-hand kingdom, which is ours because we are his through Baptism into his death and resurrection. And then there's his kingdom of everyday life, his left-hand kingdom in which we use reason, common sense, and live by his forgiveness.

It is summed up by the fact that God has done everything, and therefore we are completely free and also completely his. We are to do everything because God has done everything.

Finally, we come back to the hiddenness of the Christian life. Why is it hidden? Because as soon as it is not hidden, we fall into spiritual pride.

So, we live by faith alone in the cross alone, and that's something we don't control.

But then we don't need to because he is Lord, and we are his. Amen