

To God Alone Be The Glory

Years ago there was a popular advertisement that went something like this: “I’m a pepper, he’s a pepper, she’s a pepper, we’re a pepper. Wouldn’t you like to be a pepper too?” So how about it? Would you like to be a pepper? No? Well then, how would you like to BE A TRANSFORMED, CONFORMING NON-CONFORMIST? This is what the Holy Spirit urges us to become in today’s sermon text.

In order to BE A TRANSFORMED, CONFORMING NON-CONFORMIST, let’s look at things from God’s point of view. This can really help us appreciate God’s mercy. So picture God taking off his shoes and encouraging you to walk around in them for a while. You agree. As your feet slip into God’s shoes, your mind is suddenly flooded with the memory of how you gave life to your dear humans. You can see yourself writing on their hearts what you want them to do and what you want them to avoid, not because you are arbitrary or power hungry, but because you love them and want them to be blessed. For various reasons, however, they do the opposite of what you want. So now you feel righteous anger. Because you are a just God, you can’t simply let people off the hook for rebelling. But you are also overwhelmed with how much you love these sinful people. So you decide to have your Son, who is like you in every way, go live among the people you’ve created. He

will become like them in every way, except he will actually live according to your commands. The idea is for your Son to have a clean record which you can then deposit into each of your people’s savings accounts at your very own Bank of Justice and Righteousness. Part of your plan also includes that your Son must suffer shame and death in the place of all those people you created. In this part of the plan the idea is to erase the debts of the people for all the withdrawals of righteousness they’ve taken from your bank (the Bank of Justice and Righteousness). You’re doing all this because you are both fair and merciful. You can’t let people borrow indiscriminately, but you also don’t want your creatures to suffer forever the consequences they deserve for not being able to pay back what they borrowed from your righteousness. As you slip off God’s shoes and put your own back on, you realize you’ve seen only a slice of God’s mercy toward you and all your fellow sinners, but you have a renewed sense of how merciful our God has been to us in Jesus.

¹*Therefore, in view of God’s mercy, let’s respond. Now, what’s an appropriate response from us? Well, if we were Old Testament people we would offer God a sacrifice, an offering from our flock or herd or field. But we are New Testament people. So an appropriate response from us might be an offering of praise, prayers, flowers, money, an item for the church or the synod, a certain amount of donated*

time. But let's not stop short. God has been super-generous, and we really want to thank him. "The best of offerings he requires: your heart it is that He desires" (TLH 404:1 *alt.*). Yes, now we're getting somewhere. The apostle Paul says in our text: ¹*offer your bodies as living sacrifices*, not in the way the Old Testament believers offered their animals and grain, where fire consumed each offering so that it was gone, but by setting apart our bodies exclusively for God's use while we are alive. We don't want to be like the Christians who act as though worshiping God is done only for an hour on Sundays, and then the rest of the week is for them to do pretty much anything they please. We want to be like the Christians who have grasped the truth that worship also includes how we live during the week, what we do with these bodies and mouths. If we use them to serve God and our fellow humans, that is what Paul calls our "*spiritual act of worship*" or our "*whole-hearted worship.*"

If that still sounds a little vague, Paul explains what it means to be a living sacrifice: ²*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* In other words, be a non-conformist. Paul doesn't mean a non-conformist like Emerson or Thoreau, or in the sense of the hippies, or even in the manner of some religious groups who disdain certain foods or modern conveniences or technology. Instead God wants us not to conform to the world's pattern of rebelling against

God and his Word. When our acquaintances want us to go along with a plan that would displease God, we want to be different from them. That's when we want to be non-conformists.

At least part of us does anyway. Our sinful flesh wants to go along with everything that's bad. But instead of conforming to wrong, Paul urges us to ²*be transformed by the renewing of our minds.* We're talkin' 'bout a major change, like what takes place when a creepy, crawly caterpillar changes into a beautiful butterfly. This kind of transformation actually comes from God as a gift to us when he renews our minds by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit renews minds through the gospel in God's Word and the Sacraments. So then the Holy Spirit is very much in favor of Bible study. How appropriate that we'll be starting up our Bible studies for all ages after worship next week! How appropriate that so many of you are reading your Bible nearly every day. Have you noticed how the Holy Spirit is slowly transforming you through your daily Bible reading? Can you tell that the roots of your faith are deepening in the Lord? Perhaps you're more patient with others or yourself or God. Maybe you know your purpose in life better: to glorify Jesus because he rescued you from hell. The transformation shows itself in many ways, but one thing happens to everyone when they spend time studying God's message in the Bible: they look at what God says to us and they say, "Yep, I'm going to be like

that.” This, my friends, is a conforming attitude. Paul says it this way: ²*you will be able to test and approve (i.e. conform to) what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

It’s all fine and dandy to be transformed into a believer who conforms to God’s will and stands as a non-conformist to the world’s rebellion against God. But what do you do with yourself once the Lord has worked his love in your heart? Well, what do you do when you graduate and get your diploma? You go find a job where you can use your talents. In the Lord’s Kingdom we believers also put our talents to use for him. This means serving.

In order to serve, pride has to fly right out the window. That’s why Paul says, ³*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.*” If you do, your attitude might sound like this: “I don’t need to serve my Lord at church. I’m above that.” It’s also possible for your attitude to be too low, as in, “I’m not holy enough to help my church.” But the Lord would rather that we balance against both extremes and ³*think of ourselves with sober judgment.* That way we see ourselves realistically, not too good to serve and not too bad either, but *in accordance with the measure of faith God has given.* Faith in Jesus makes the difference. Faith moves us to find a way to help in gospel ministry.

Think of how this kind of cooperation

works in your body: ⁴*each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function.* Your kidneys do something different from your eyes. Your bones do something different from your muscles. It’s the same in the church. You can help in ways that others can’t. Why be part of the team? Because ⁵*in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.* So you have a claim on me. You have a claim on the person three pews away from you. And we all have a claim on you. So even if you came to church by yourself, you aren’t here by yourself. As members of this church-family, we’ve been brought together in the Lord’s kingdom, and, wonder of wonders, he made us in such a way that we complete one another. Working together as a church-team, we can accomplish mighty things by God’s grace and power. We have already—may God have all the glory. But there’s room for more to get involved.

Here in Romans 12 when Paul lists the spiritual gifts that can be found in a typical congregation, he doesn’t mention any of the sensational gifts, like speaking in tongues or healing. Perhaps that’s because these non-flashy gifts are the ones that help a congregation become a blessing to their community. As we think about each gift in Paul’s list, ask yourself, “Do I have this gift? How can I use it faithfully in service to the Lord and the gospel ministry?”

“Prophecy” is bringing a message from God to people. It is to be done (not as the NIV translates, “in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you,” but rather) “*in complete agreement with the faith.*” In other words, whatever message you share with others should agree with the teachings of the Bible. * Serving. The world says serving is a burden, not a gift. But Jesus said, “*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mk 10:43-45). What an honor when someone asks you to help! * Teaching, opening the minds of others so they can see things from God’s perspective—what a blessing! When you explain God’s love or God’s will to others, you are making disciples, teaching as Christ commanded (Mt 28:18-19) * The next gift is one of my favorites, Encouraging. What could be better than helping a friend find strength in God? (1 Sam 23:16) No doubt, a fellow believer has lifted you up with godly words when you needed spiritual encouragement. What a blessing when you encourage others! | There’s a really great way to encourage everyone else in the church without opening your mouth: attend in-person worship. When others see you here, it encourages them. * “Giving” is the next gift. When you give an appropriate offering for your

circumstance in life, that’s actually a special gift from the Holy Spirit to you. * Leadership. Imagine if the church didn’t have people who were diligent about discovering and meeting the needs of the congregation, diligent at diffusing situations that are dangerous to our unity. * Finally there’s “Showing Mercy,” cheerfully caring for others, and doing so even when we wonder whether we will waste our efforts on an ingrate. What a gift to show mercy!

God has blessed our church with many talented people. I’m talking about you. If you want to find a way to use your God-given talents, let’s talk. There are as many ways to help as there are people in St. John’s. Some of our members have the ability assess your strengths and weaknesses. There is a task that’s just right for you whether you have four hours per year or four hours per week. Many of you already know the joy of serving the Lord and his people. I want all of you to know this joy.

Why do we serve? Why conform to God’s will? Why be a non-conformist to the world’s way of thinking and doing? What’s our motivation? Are we just trying to be good people? Are we just duty oriented? Or have our minds been renewed by the Holy Spirit through the message about our Savior Jesus so that we have become transformed, conforming non-

conformists? O Lord God, we are
yours. Shape us and guide us so that we
may be your living sacrifices.