



New Again

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Romans 12:1-2

September 11, 2016

Yesterday, I officiated at an outdoor wedding held at a winery not far from here. What was distinctive about this wedding was that I officiated at the wedding of the bride's parents some 33 years ago.

I've lost track of the number of weddings I've done. I suspect it's in the neighborhood of a thousand. I could write a book on all the things that have happened at weddings. Like the snake that made a guest appearance at a garden wedding or the bride who passed out during the ceremony or the mother-in-law who threatened her prospective son-in-law just prior to the service. Don't get me started.



For better or worse
For richer or poorer
In sickness and in health
To love and to cherish
As long as we both shall live.

I enjoy officiating at weddings, yet I have mixed emotions about all the money spent on superfluous things such as flowers, limos and open bars. The heart and soul of any wedding is what

the bride and groom pledge to each other. Some couples attempt to write their own vows, but they rarely pull it off. You can't improve on the time-honored words from the 1549 Book of Common Prayer: "For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live."

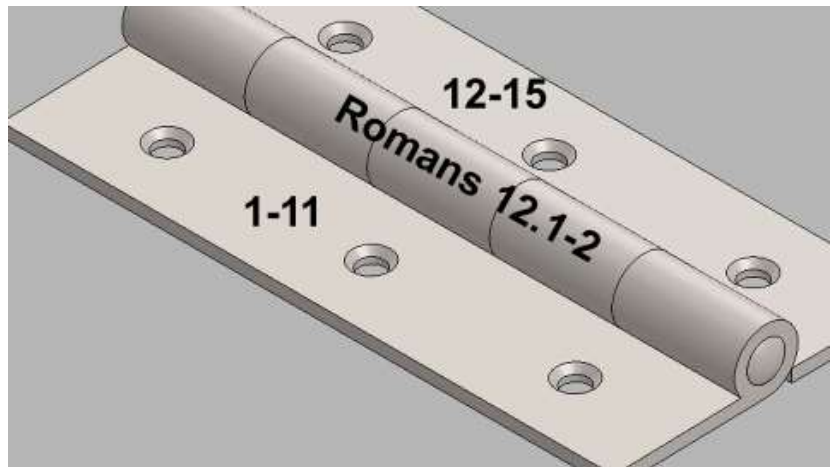
Wedding vows are a way of giving every part of oneself to someone else. I give you my affections, my body, my soul, my money, even my bad habits and self-centered ambitions. Everything I have is yours. It's not going to work for the bride and groom to keep back things for themselves. Marriage is built on trust. Marriage doesn't thrive when secrets are kept and communication is held back from each other.

Why am I telling you this? Because what Paul writes in Romans 12 equates to wedding vows. Paul offers every part of himself to God.

Paul's letter to the Romans could be called his *magnum opus* or signature work of Christian theology.

Yet, this deeply theological letter is also

eminently practical. These first two verses of Romans 12 function like a hinge connecting what Paul has written on Christian theology in chapters 1-11 with matters of practical importance in chapters 12-15.



He begins in chapter 12, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy....” Mercy functions as an appropriate one-word summary of the previous 11 chapters. We often talk about God’s Big Story in Scripture using three words: creation, fall and redemption. All three words factor big time into Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul begins by reminding his readers that we are created for relationship with God. By the end of chapter 1, Paul laments that we fall out of relationship with God. Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us from God. Beginning in chapter 3, Paul rehearses God’s redemption plan. God, who is rich in mercy, redeems us back into relationship through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

Our part in this redemption plan is clearly enumerated at the end of verse 1: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.” This verse recalls the central mission of Jesus who offered his life as a living sacrifice for our sins.

We respond in kind to God’s gift of salvation by offering our bodies or whole selves as a living sacrifice.

The second verse of Romans 12 makes this same point: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind so that you will be able to test and approve God’s will—His good, pleasing and perfect will.” Here, conformity to the world is set in opposition to being transformed by the renewal of our minds. Conformity invests in transitory things, while transformation represents an investment in eternal realities.

The Greek word for “be transformed” (metamorphoo), is where we derive our English word metamorphosis. The change from caterpillar to butterfly is an apt description of the metamorphosis God wants to bring about in us.



I had a flashback yesterday. I remembered my son playing with Transformer toys when he was a child. Back in 1985, Hasbro came out with a line of toys called

Transformers. While they appeared to be ordinary cars or a trucks, they could be changed into action figures. I dug through Andrew’s old toy box yesterday and found one of his Transformers. It’s the pick-up truck he used to manipulate into an action figure.

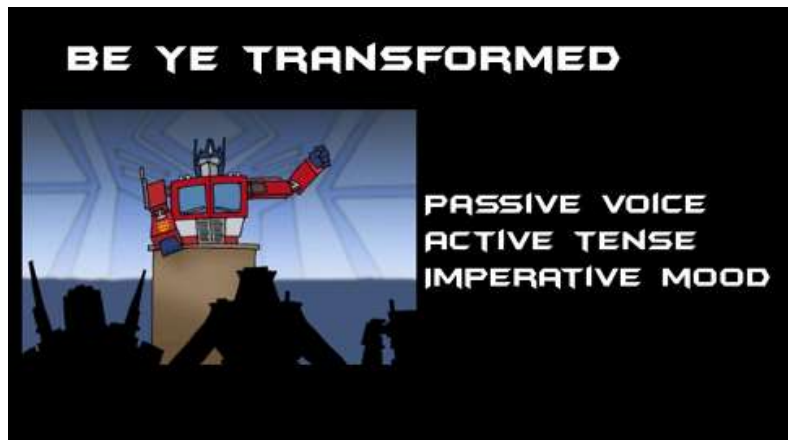
What an appropriate image to depict God’s change in people. God wants to transform us into the people God intends us to become.

Let’s drill down on the verb “be transformed.” For starters, it’s written in passive voice. If I say I am preaching

right now, I would be speaking in active voice. But if I told you that God is directing me in this sermon, I would be speaking in passive voice. Active voice is what I do. Passive voice is what is done to me. Spiritual transformation is not my doing. Transformation is what God does in me when I willingly participate.

While “be transformed” appears in passive voice, it’s also expressed in present tense, meaning this transformation is a continuous process. Transformation is not a once-and-done scenario. Transformation is a continual process of being conformed into the image of Christ.

There’s one more dimension to this verb “be transformed.” It’s written in passive voice, present tense and imperative mood.



Transformation is not an optional second step for only the super committed among us. Transformation is central to believing in Jesus. Wherever did we end up with this bifurcation that we can profess faith in Christ without making any real progress toward becoming one of Jesus’ disciples?

“Be transformed by the renewal of our minds so that you will be able to test and approve God’s will.” Transformation begins in the mind. Attitude influences behavior. Right thinking produces right behavior. Some of us, sad to say, are subsisting on a steady diet of mental junk food. It only stands to reason if nearly all our inputs are secular, our worldview will become secular as well.

We’ve been talking and praying for renewal in our church over these last nine months. God’s expressed desire is to



renew us. Renew is a simple compound word made up of the prefix “re,” meaning “again,” coupled with the root word new. Literally, the word

means to make new again. God wants to make us new again. By offering our bodies and minds to God’s service, God makes us new again.

C. S. Lewis tells a story in *Mere Christianity* about a schoolboy who was asked what he thought God was like. The boy replied that as nearly as he could tell, God “was the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is having a good time then trying to stop it.”

Let’s set the record straight. God doesn’t want to curtail our fun. God wants to make us new again.

Our theme this fall is *Souls on Fire*. God wants to ignite our passion for faith. God wants our souls to catch fire. God wants to make us new again.

These two verses from Romans 12 constitute the so-what portion of Paul’s letter. In every sermon I preach, I ask “so what difference does this sermon make in my life?” Two applications come to mind. One is addressed collectively to us as a church and the other relates to us personally as individual Christians.

I’m careful not to preach partisan politics from this pulpit. That said, the current state of our national election deeply troubles me. How we ended up with these two candidates for president is beyond me. America is deeply-divided over

issues of religion, race and politics. A divided nation needs a united church. We must unite around this central ambition of loving and serving God. American democracy desperately needs a robust infusion of Christian ethics and morality. This is not a time to privatize our faith and pull away from participating in the public marketplace of ideas.

My second application harkens back to something I've said previously from this pulpit. I want to challenge you to begin a spiritual growth plan or resume your practice of it. We want you to become as intentional about your spiritual life as you would a business plan at work or an exercise regimen at your gym.



When I talk about a spiritual growth plan, some of you think I am talking about getting a root canal. It sounds onerous and burdensome to do. Let me rephrase it. God wants to make us new again. What practices do you need to incorporate into your life so that God can come alive in you?

This summer, I suggested taking a sheet of paper or the notepad on your phone and dividing it into three sections. Separate the words of our mission statement, *Becoming Like Christ Together for the World*, into three columns.

Identify the left-hand column as *Becoming Like Christ*. I offered a few suggestions for your consideration: praying 15 minutes daily, reading the Bible three times weekly or resolving to attend Sunday worship three Sundays out of the month.

The middle column, marked *Together*, pinpoints ways you can grow in faith with other like-minded believers.

Remember, we can be better Christians together than we can be on our own. Join a Sunday morning class or the Monday Night Men's group or a Women's Bible Study. Sign up for Growing Your Soul or the Great Banquet. Identify someone with whom you can become a more intentional spiritual friend.

In the last column, marked *for the World*, identifies means by which you can serve God with your time and money. Volunteer with a local mission. Practice generosity by giving a specified percentage of your income to the Lord's work. Build a relationship with someone in your neighborhood who doesn't know Christ.

This fall, our goal is to enlist a thousand people in this spiritual growth plan. Why a thousand people you ask? Why not? If you are willing to commit to this effort, put a star next to your name when we pass the Connect Pad. Those of you listening online can email your intentions to us. If you want assistance with this renewal effort, circle your name so we can contact you.

What better time to enter into God's live-again invitation than on this first Sunday of the fall season? Lord, I give you every part of myself to you. Everything I have is yours—my body as a living sacrifice and my willingness to be transformed by the renewal of my mind.

Spiritual Growth Plan

Together

- Join a Bible study or class
- Enroll in Great Banquet or Grow Your Soul
- Meet with spiritual friend for coffee

Spiritual Growth Plan

For the World

- Volunteer at local mission
- Practice generosity by giving ___%
- Build friendship with neighbor

