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Isaiah 49:1-6, Romans 12:1-2, 9-21
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

"Be Transformed"

In his book, *"Transforming Congregational Culture,"* Rev. Tony Robinson asks the fundamental question, "What's the business of the church?" When we look at the vast array of congregational life in America and all around the world, we realize what an important question it is. All too often, congregations seem to have more in common with civic clubs, small businesses or fraternal organizations than with the simple spiritual community of believers formed by Jesus. Sometimes, you have to cut through many layers of activities and programs to get to the fundamental character of the church. So, what's the business of the church? Robinson answers: "Human transformation." Then he asks the corollary question, "How's business?"

Robinson's simple but profound understanding of the church is not some new discovery or novel insight. His words echo the words of Paul at the beginning of the 12th chapter of Romans. Paul writes:

"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." (12:2)

Those of you who are familiar with the letter to the Romans will know that the letter falls into two parts. In the first eleven chapters, Paul lays out what God has done in Jesus Christ to bring about our salvation. Then, the 12th chapter begins Paul's discussion of the kind of life we are to live in response to the gospel.

As a parent, I have learned over the years that my children are going to listen to only so much advice before they begin to tune me out. If I want to be sure they hear what I think is most important, I say it first, before their eyes glaze over and their minds shut. In the same way, Paul wants to be sure that his listeners don't miss the most important thing about the life they are called to live. They are to live a life that is transformed by the gospel. Jesus calls us out of the world so that we may live as new people in the world by the power of the gospel.

Be transformed. We do not transform ourselves. We are transformed by God. In the prophet Isaiah, we read of God's servant who is chosen by God, taught by God, transformed by God, protected by God and led by God to proclaim God's salvation to the ends of the earth. In some of the passages that describe the work of the servant, the servant seems to be the whole people of Israel who have been called for a special ministry. In other passages, the servant appears to be an individual like the long-awaited Messiah. The church has understood the figure of the servant to be Jesus Christ, who takes our sin upon himself and suffers for our salvation. There are also aspects of the servant's ministry that may be seen in the lives of all those who are called, transformed and sustained by God to

be agents of God's redemptive work in the world. Paul is saying that God has chosen you and me to carry out that work in the world. We serve as transformed people.

Human transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are transformed so that we may be remade in the image of Christ. This transformation is more than some kind of gradual moral improvement. When Paul writes of the transformation of his own life by his encounter with Jesus Christ, he speaks in terms of death and resurrection. In Galatians, he says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (2:19b-20) Only spiritual transformation can make a persecutor of the church into the greatest builder of the church. When the Spirit transforms our lives, our bitterness, our greed, our hatreds, our selfishness and our prejudices melt away and we find a new life centered in God.

This spiritual transformation has a purpose far beyond what it does for one who experiences it. God transforms us for a purpose. Paul says that the goal of our transformation is to "discern the will of God - what is good, acceptable and perfect." He goes on to describe what it looks like to do the will of God. Within the church, we are to love and honor one another. We are to be ardent in our faith and patient in our suffering. We are to care for those in need and practice hospitality to strangers.

As parents and as a congregation are we helping our children and youth understand and experience this spiritual transformation and learn how to discern the will of God? When the Protestant Reformers talked about the responsibility of the church and of parents in raising children, they believed the first duty of parents is to raise their children to become citizens of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes, we fall into the trap of being more concerned about our children's place in the kingdoms of this world than in the Kingdom of God. We all face a lot of pressure to conform to the values of this world. What parents don't want their children to have every advantage at school and every opportunity outside of the classroom for music, sports, art and other activities that are good and valuable? Sometimes good parents find themselves compromising their own values to make this happen - juggling schedules, carpools and family time. When we live on the edge of exhaustion, it is hard to make the effort to tend to the spiritual and moral nurture of our children. It takes just as much discipline, if not more, to grow to be morally and spiritually healthy, as it does to be intellectually and physically healthy.

As parents and as a congregation, we vow to nurture the children we baptize. If we take this vow seriously, then we need to give the time needed to help our children grow spiritually and morally. There are no shortcuts to basic training. As a congregation, we need to volunteer to teach in the Sunday school, work in the nursery or help with the youth program. We want our children and youth to know the power of Christ's transforming spirit in their lives. When we have a serious shortage of volunteer teachers in our church school, what kind of answer are we giving to Tony Robinson's question, "How's business?" The only requirement to teach is a transformed heart that loves God's children.

Paul not only describes how we are to live transformed lives within the church; but he also paints a picture of living a transformed life in relationship to the world outside the church.

Beginning at verse 14 of Chapter 12, Paul describes the pattern of such a life. As a congregation, we have a mission to live as transformed people in the world. Paul says we are to live peacefully and simply, to share in the joys and sufferings of others, to practice kindness rather than revenge. Our new mission statement, that is currently being studied by our church officers, states that we are to be "a welcoming community of faith where Jesus Christ transforms lives." Maybe we need to evaluate everything we do, not only within the church but also beyond the church in light of the call of God, to be transformed and to be servants of transformation in the world.

Of all the characteristics of a transformed life, one characteristic stands out from all the rest. Those who live transformed lives love their enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that it is the capacity to love our enemies that makes us sons and daughters of God. Anyone can love those who love them back; only those whose lives have been transformed by the love of God find the capacity to love their enemies.

This fall we saw a poignant example of such love. In early October, Charles Carl Roberts entered an Amish School in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and held the children and adults hostage. After releasing the boys and some of the other adults, he tied up twelve girls. He boarded up the school; then he opened fire, killing five and seriously wounding five others. He then killed himself. It was another all too frequent and horrifying act of murder by a deeply disturbed and troubled person. We grieve over the senseless tragedy against, and the violence of, our society. We are angry that such things can happen. What do we do to stop the violence? The Amish Community did what came naturally to them. They grieved; they cared for the suffering families; they buried their dead; they turned to God for guidance; they forgave the man who committed such a terrible act. They raised money for the families of the young victims and for the wife and children of Charles Carl Roberts. Paul writes, "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good," (12:21) Suddenly, we feel as if we are back to the simple spiritual community formed by Jesus.

There is so much pressure on us as individuals, families and as the church to conform to the world. We are tempted as Christians, as faithful parents and as a church to lower our standards and to take the easier path of conformity until we stand for nothing important. Instead, we open our hearts to experience more and more the power of God's transforming grace; we live together in the church as transformed people and, as transformed people, we go into the world as those who "overcome evil with good."