

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

August 27, 2023 – PENTECOST 13 /PROPER 16, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Transformed by God—for Christ and for Others*”

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| Old Testament | Isaiah 51:1-6 | (God’s salvation is eternal; He will comfort Zion) |
| Psalter | Psalms 138 | (Give thanks to the Lord; His love endures forever) |
| Epistle | Romans 12:1-8 | (We are to transform our minds and present our bodies to God as living sacrifices) |
| Gospel | St. Matthew 16:13-20 | (Jesus asks whom people think He is. Answer: The Messiah!) |

The animated 1984 TV series “Transformers” was about giant alien autobots and evil decepticons—robots capable of transforming into vehicles and weapons—that waged war with humans as Earth’s fate hung in the balance. In the 21st century, the science-fiction franchise gave way to a series of action films. Although I’ve never seen either the TV show or the movies, I understand the storyline always revolves around dramatic changes and often malevolent transformations.

Benjamin Franklin famously wrote in a 1789 letter: “In this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.” Change, it would seem, is an inevitable part of life. In fact, whether or not we want to experience it, change is the only constant! Even though our routines may be the same day in, day out, each day’s circumstances change those routines slightly. For instance, you might always start the coffee pot as soon as you get out of bed, but you might wake up at a different time each day. Granted, not all changes are bad. Some are for the better. Whether we like change or not, think of it this way: the only people who don’t change are people who have died.¹

In today’s Epistle lesson, Saint Paul begs us to allow God to change—or transform—us so that we are no longer conformed to the ways of this lost and evil world. He begins by making this appeal: “by the mercies of God . . . present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, which is your spiritual worship.” Since many of the religions of the ancient world practiced animal sacrifices, Paul’s first-century listeners would be well acquainted with the concept of sacrifice. But instead of animal sacrifices, the apostle is encouraging a lifestyle based on the principle that as Christians we offer ourselves to God through sacrificial *love*—for our Lord and for others.

But what exactly is a sacrifice? It differs from an offering or a gift in that it involves a cost to the giver. In Jesus’ story of the poor widow’s gift to the Temple, she put in her last two coins. Christ points out that for *her*, that was a sacrifice. Others put in a lot more money—but because they could afford that charitable giving, *it wasn’t* a sacrifice (Mark 12:43). Therefore, offering ourselves to God as living sacrifices means it will cost us something, such as: our pride, our self-sufficiency, wrong ideas, time and energy, disgusting secret habits, addictions, and possibly much more.

Saint Paul experienced firsthand what it meant to be a living sacrifice. Throughout his ministry, he endured every imaginable hardship from persecution and stoning, to near starvation and drowning. Yet, Paul’s understanding of living as a sacrifice for God is expressed in Acts 20:24: “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I have received from the Lord Jesus.” Paul was willing to say of his own life, “come what may, I will do the will of God.”

Further, he goes on to urge *us*: “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” (v. 2). Now, before you ‘recovering perfectionists’ start to panic, let me remind you that the English word “perfect” is actually “*τέλειον*” in the Greek New Testament, and it means “complete.” Yes, the will of God is perfect, but it is also complete—it lacks nothing.

In Paul’s teaching, there is no body/mind duality as was common in the ancient pagan world. We are to offer our *bodies* to God as living sacrifices and we are to offer our *minds* as well. This is why Jesus says in Mark 12:30: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

The word used for “strength” in the Greek New Testament, “*is-khoos*,” connotes “ability, force, might, power,” all *physical* attributes. We are to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and body—completely, lacking nothing.

The word Paul uses in verse 2 for “transformed is “*metamorphoûsthe*” from which we derive the term “metamorphosis.” It reminds us of the homely caterpillar in the cocoon which transforms into a glorious butterfly, and that’s the idea here. The transformation about which Paul is talking happens from the inside out, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit in our lives. When we open ourselves to that power, we are transformed into the people God always intended us to be.

Paul explains that this transformation begins with the renewal of our *minds*. And here, I’ll say again what I’ve said before: In computing when you input nonsense data, you get nonsense output. The phrase for this is “garbage in, garbage out,” or GIGO. Our minds work the same way: When we expose them to “garbage”—crudeness, violence, racist ideas, pornography, pagan practices such as psychics or tarot cards, mindless television, all the warped ways of the world—our warped minds will be filled with *garbage* instead of God’s ways. And what should we do with garbage? *Throw it out!*

What if, instead, we heeded Paul’s advice in Philippians 4:8 (AMP): “Finally, believers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable and worthy of respect, whatever is right and confirmed by God’s Word, whatever is pure and wholesome, whatever is lovely and brings peace, whatever is admirable and of good repute; if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think continually on these things [center your mind on them, and implant them in your heart].”

Christian pastor and author Rick Warren writes in *The Purpose Driven Life*, “The battle for sin is won or lost in your mind” (p. 210). This is consistent with Jesus’ teachings such as, if you *think about* someone in anger, it’s the same as killing them. Or, if you emotionally *lust after* another person, you’ve already committed adultery (Matthew 5:21-22 & 28). Rather, we should, as St. Paul writes in Second Corinthians 10:5, “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

After giving a summary of the basis for Christian discipleship, next Paul looks at our relationships to each other in the Church. All Christians are gifted by God for service to others, but some think more highly of themselves and their gifts than they ought. Paul goes straight to the heart of the problem in churches and social organizations: Pride divides and stuck-up-ness separates.

Jesus said to His followers, “... among you, those who are the greatest should take the lesser rank, and the leader should be like a servant” (Luke 22:26, NLT). Our natural inclination is to assert ourselves above others. But it is through reliance on God’s grace, not on our own high self-estimations that we can offer ourselves as living sacrifices in service to others. It is by the “measure of faith that God has assigned” to each of us that we can conduct ourselves with proper modesty and humility. This is necessary for the proper functioning of the body of Christ, as Paul explains in verse 4: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

We all need to know there are others walking alongside us in this life, others who will support and encourage us. This is one reason it is essential for Christians to have a faith community such as we have at St. John’s Church, Compass. Here, we *do* serve one another in love! Just as an example, two weeks ago, Sabra Grimes was dealing with a knee replacement, yet she took time to send me a get-well card wishing me a good ongoing recovery from my recent nasal surgery and cataract removal. Christianity is a group effort, and while spiritual directors may give us excellent guidance along the way, it is with the entire Church that we establish the strong bonds God desires for us.²

We belong to one another for mutual support and we are put together by God for mutual ministry. This is the subject of verses 6 through 9 of Romans 12 (TLB): “God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, then prophesy whenever you can—as often as your faith is strong enough to receive a message from God. If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If you are a preacher, see to it that your sermons are strong and helpful.

If God has given you money, be generous in helping others with it. If God has given you administrative ability and put you in charge of the work of others, take the responsibility seriously. Those who offer comfort to the sorrowing should do so with Christian cheer. Don't just pretend that you love others: really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of the good."

Well, I hope that you've gathered from today's sermon that the best way to transform our minds so that we can become living sacrifices for Christ and for others is to be aware of the morals and values, instructions and guidelines, standards and examples the Bible offers us.

That's why, in closing, I'd like to pray from page 236 of our *Book of Common Prayer* (1979):

"Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to *hear* them, *read*, *mark*, *learn*, and *inwardly digest* them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever." *Amen*.

¹ Adapt. John Otte, "Narnia: Changing In The Wardrobe," 9 December 2005, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/narnia-changing-in-the-wardrobe-john-otte-sermon-on-narnia-86090), <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/narnia-changing-in-the-wardrobe-john-otte-sermon-on-narnia-86090>> 21 August 2023. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Anthony Seel, "Shaped for Serving God Series," 7 June 2004, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/shaped-for-serving-god-anthony-seel-sermon-on-gifts-general-69133?page=4&wc=800) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/shaped-for-serving-god-anthony-seel-sermon-on-gifts-general-69133?page=4&wc=800>> 21 August 2023. Used with permission.