

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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October 29, 2017  
*8<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Called to Life*  
Romans 12:1-2

### Called to a Transformed Life

Today marks the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday of our 9-month emphasis on “Call.” When this idea was conceived last June by the session of our church, I think most of us imagined hearing the great Bible stories of people being called by God, people like Abraham and Moses, today’s story of David, and the fishermen by the sea. Perhaps we even imagined ourselves experiencing something as startling as a burning bush, or an abrupt change in our lives like the first disciples. Or maybe we thought we already knew that our time for a call was long past. If it hasn’t happened by now, it isn’t likely to happen in the dwindling number of years ahead.

Who knew that we could find enough scripture to sustain 9 months of exploring what it means to be called? Yet as we prepared for this season of learning, we uncovered questions about who we are called to be, and how we are called to live in addition to what we are called to do. And those who have been able to participate in the “Called to Life” classes have been discovering the interconnections of these three dimensions of God’s call. In Jesus Christ, God calls us to **be transformed**, to **live a life devoted to God**, and to **do our part** in making God’s will manifest in the world.

All three of these are in these verses which begin Romans 12. Eugene Peterson renders these classic verses into contemporary prose in *The Message*.

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

*(The Message, 2001, NavPress, Colorado Springs, p. 2054)*

Well-formed maturity—isn’t that a lifelong quest? Writer and educator Parker Palmer tells of realizing when he was in his 30s that rather than seeking his own vocation, he was pursuing the expectations of the culture in which he was raised. Gradually, he saw that accumulating wealth, holding power, winning at competition, and securing a career were not going to allow him to live the deeper, truer life which lay within. So he began to try to live like some of his heroes-- Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day.

And that didn’t work, either. For while the values and convictions of exemplary people give us ideals and goals, they are exemplary persons because they answer the call to be who they are, to live their lives, to do what they are uniquely positioned to do. Palmer began to discover that the voice of call, the voice of vocation, is not “out there” as much as it is “in here,” as he says, “calling me to the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given to me at birth by God.” (*Let Your Life Speak*, 2000, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 2-10)

*Take your everyday, ordinary life, and place it before God as an offering. Embrace what God does for you, fix your attention on God, and you'll be changed from the inside out. God will bring the best out of you.*

In order to discern the outward journey, the action, the “doing” to which God is calling us, it is essential to spend time on an inward journey, going deeper into one’s soul to find the “being” God has given us. The Hasidic tale of Rabbi Zusya reminds us how these journeys are integrated with one another. When he was an old man, Zusya said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” (Palmer, p. 11)

2000 years ago, the tax collectors and sinners who gathered around Jesus were moving closer to being the persons God made them to be, by moving closer to Jesus. The Pharisees who criticized this sort of fraternizing were living an outward conformity to holiness, conformity which actually took them farther away from God’s mercy and will. 3000 years ago, the older sons of Jesse, who may have looked like leadership material on the outside, were not destined to be king. Their little brother, David, was. The Bible’s wisdom, which we keep needing to relearn, is that God looks on the inside, God moves in our inner souls, God knows our hearts because it is on the inside that God makes us uniquely gifted, uniquely called, uniquely chosen and beloved persons.

Likewise, it is within our minds, says the apostle Paul, that transformation, God’s desire and will for the world, can begin. Writer E. Glenn Hinson is a retired Baptist seminary professor of spirituality and New Testament. Hinson invents a word to describe the quality of persons who “can look beyond the horizon of their age and culture and see what God is trying to bring into being.” His new word is “horizonal.” (“Horizonal Persons,” 1995, in *Weavings* vol X, no. 2, p. 23) (At first glance I thought he meant “horizontal,” but no, it’s “horizonal,” as in the apparent boundary between earth and sky.) Hinson says we need more horizonal persons in the world. If you’ve climbed a mountain, you know that up on top you can see farther than down in the valley. Being higher up broadens one’s horizon. To see more of what God is trying to bring into being, we need to be lifted up above the age and culture in which we live. Hinson says that Romans 12:2 tells us we need “persons not simply shaped in the mold of their own age but transformed by a recycling of their understanding so that they have a sense of what is God’s will—what is good and acceptable to God and contributes to God’s ultimate purpose.”

On this Reformation Sunday, it seems appropriate to use Martin Luther as an example of how a renewed mind leads to transformation. It was in his academic study of the letter to the Romans that Martin Luther experienced his breakthrough, the spark which began the Protestant Reformation. He was a horizonal person. 500 years ago, this German monk and scholar rose above his age and culture to hear the profound truth that we are saved by grace through faith, and not by our works. That “recycled understanding,” the renewal of his mind, spoke to him as a judgment on the practices of the church he was part of—and as they say, the rest is history. In the last 20 years, Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed church leaders have publically agreed to the primacy of grace, that God acts in us first, and that good works are the result of faith. We’re all on the same page now with regard to what used to be a divisive argument. God’s horizon, I believe, is the healing of those wounds of division in Christ’s church.

Which brings us back to the search for God’s will, expressed in our lives as what God is calling us to be, to live, and to do. Sometimes we think of God’s will as a track laid out before us. If we get on that track, and stay on it, our lives will run smoothly. Or maybe we imagine that God’s will is more like a blueprint, the plan for our life which will build a sturdy house in which we may live safely and happily. Glenn Hinson tells us that the apostle Paul sees it differently. He writes,

In his letters, the will of God, what pleases God, or what is acceptable to God has to do with **what kind of persons we are**, with attitude and outlook. God wants us to be **persons who live our lives** from the vantage point of a covenant with God through and in Jesus Christ, conscientized and sensitized and tenderized by love, **making the very best decisions we can make** in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. (Hinson, p. 26)

Did you hear that? God's will, like God's call, concerns who we are to be, how we are to live, and then, what we are to do.

So if you are disappointed that you have never experienced a burning bush, a bolt of lightning, or a thundering voice calling you to God's service in the world, a vocation that is clear and definable to you and to others, don't think for a moment that you lack a calling. Or if you decided a while ago that your part in God's plan is quite minor and inconsequential, I urge you to reconsider. For the call of God, and the will of God for each one of us, are included in the great overarching plan of God, a plan defined by love, for the sake of the world. Like the strands of a rope, these three aspects--who we are to be, how we are to live, and what we are to do--are God's plan. The strands give strength to one another, and together tie us to God. The invitation to be part of God's plan compels a three-fold response as we weave together who we are as God's beloved children, how we live in relationship with others, and the work, service, and activities which fill our daily lives. (Laura Kelly Fanucci, 2016, "Called to Life Participant Guide, pp. 17-19, Collegeville Institute)

For we are called to be transformed, horizontal, Christ-like, God-loving, Spirit-filled, ever-learning, always-growing people. It doesn't matter what our age or our station in life, that call is always before us, beckoning us on.

So take your everyday, ordinary life  
*Yeah, that's me, alright, pretty ordinary.*

and place it before God as an offering.  
*Really? God wants me?*

Embrace what God does for you,  
*Life, love, purpose, meaning? It's so much!*

fix your attention on God,  
*That will mean getting rid of distractions  
and ungodly desires*

and you'll be changed from the inside out.  
*Whoa! Sweeping out the cobwebs  
and the dirt.*

God will bring the best out of you.  
*Is that a promise?*

It's the gospel truth.