

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 25
November 19, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Transformed to serve

—Romans 12:1-8

“Transformers: more than meets the eye. Transformers: robots in disguise.” Do any of you remember those animated cartoons and the theme song? As a child growing up in the 80s, I loved the Transformers. There was something intriguing about these alien robots who secretly lived among humans, serving and protecting people. The rally yellow Chevy Camaro that turned into the fun-loving robot soldier Bumblebee, right? I mean it makes for a great story, doesn’t it?

Did you know that you are a Transformer? Go with me on this, okay? Maybe at first glance you look ordinary. It appears as though there isn’t anything special about you. But you have a secret. You are different. Something is different about you. You are more than meets the eye.

You see, the apostle Paul talks about that in the words of our text for today, from the book of Romans 12. **“Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God—which is your appropriate worship. Also, do not continue to conform to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you test and approve what is the will of God—what is good, pleasing, and perfect.*”** God says we are to *be transformed*. How? *By the renewal of your mind*.

What does that mean? Well, Paul says that God does not want us to **“conform to the pattern of this world.”** The word that Paul uses for “conform to the pattern” is the word from which we get our English word, “schematics.” Schematics are blueprints. They are plans that are to be followed. God says that transformed people no longer follow the schematics of the world. Transformed people don’t plan their lives based on the blueprints of society.

Well, what are some of the schematics of society? Boy, we could think of many, couldn’t we? I’m going to highlight one that I think we see all the time. Just drive down Southern or Baseline, and you can easily see this schematic in action. Here is the blueprint or the pattern of this world: Impose your will on others. Do what is best for you. That’s a schematic or blueprint that we can clearly see in our society.

Just a few days ago I was driving home from church, and the traffic was busy. And some guy zooms up behind me weaving in and out of traffic. He nearly caused three accidents on that drive. Now maybe he needed to get somewhere in an emergency. I don’t know. But you could just see and sense the frustration on the other drivers because of this one guy. He imposed his will on others. He did what was best for him.

And here’s the problem with that. My heart has that same blueprint, and so does yours. I don’t like waiting in the left lane as I see people zoom ahead in the right lane until the construction zone and then cut in ahead of everybody else. No way! I don’t like to inconvenience myself for the sake of someone else who is in need of my time and energy and service. No. I have things to do. And if I do need to serve someone else, I have the blueprint imprinted on my heart that asks the question, “What’s in it for me? What am I going to get out of it?” It’s not natural to selflessly serve others. It is not natural to go into action solely for the benefit of someone else.

But that is what God calls you and me to do. **“Do not continue to conform to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you test and approve what is the will of God—what is good, pleasing, and perfect.*”**

We are transformed. Our mindset is different. Why? Listen again to Paul. **“Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God—which is your appropriate worship.”** Do you see it? Paul is not telling us to be good for goodness’ sake. He’s not telling us to sacrifice our lives so that we receive a pat on the back. He’s telling us to live our lives in service to others because of God’s mercy toward us. We are living in the time between Jesus’ ascension into heaven and his return on the Last Day. And Paul directs us to the blueprint *Jesus* had when he gave himself as the ultimate sacrifice. We faithfully serve because he served us. And this transformation to serve doesn’t even start *within* us. It starts with God’s mercy *outside* of us. It starts with Jesus.

God looked at his world and his gut hurt. He had the sick feeling as he saw the world in a horrible situation. He saw a world that had become so self-absorbed. He saw a world that was tainted with the stains of sin, and no matter how people might try to turn their lives around and fix the problem of sin, they can’t. The stains are permanent. And the pit in God’s stomach came when he knew the end result for the people of the world – eternal separation from him. Imagine. Not being in the presence of God’s love and kindness. Not having that rest at night. Having eternal agony and torment, restlessness and pain. That’s what was in store for us had it not been for God’s *mercy*.

But God *is* merciful. He does not give us what our sins deserve. Instead, he gives his Son. That mercy starts *outside* us. Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus is the Lamb of God whose blood shed on the cross makes us clean. The stains are removed. No matter what dark spots we may have in our lives, God removes them. He blots them out.

That's mercy. That mercy then comes inside us. We are transformed right in line with God's mercy to us. We are more than meets the eye. We are transformed. We have a new way of thinking. I'm not like the sinful world. I'm different. I am God's child. I am transformed. And so are you. And now we want to live that way. This is how Paul describes that new thinking. He says, **"Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God—which is your appropriate worship."** Offer your whole body as a living sacrifice.

That was a vivid picture for a first century person. Worshipers would take an entire animal, every last piece of it, and sacrifice it to their god. Our God wants transformed people to do the same. You see, Jesus never had in mind a religion of half-hearted devotion. He never used the phrase "spiritual life" because to Jesus everything we do is a reflection of our spirit. Everything. God wants every bit of what we have to give. He has no room for those who put on their faith on Sunday morning for one hour like a nicely pressed shirt or dress and then quickly change their clothes before kickoff. You know what I mean? No, our worship is offering our entire bodies, our entire lives, as a sacrifice to God... every minute of every day... whether we are here or in the world.

And that's a big difference from the schematics of our world. Instead of offering ourselves as a pat on the back or even as a benefit to someone else, we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, a thank-offering for God's mercy to us. We offer our entire lives as a living sacrifice to *God* all the time.

Let's make this practical for our lives. Maybe when you wake up in the morning, you might pray, "Dear Lord, today you have shown me your mercy. I am your child. And today I have a choice. And I can clench these hands to show anger and stinginess, or I can open them to show kindness and generosity. Lord, I give them to you as a living sacrifice. Dear Lord, today I can use my tongue to criticize and gossip, or I can use it to build up and praise. Lord, I give it to you as a living sacrifice. Dear Lord, today I can use this mind to jealously want what others have, or I can think of ways to help them protect what you have given them. Lord, I give it to you as a living sacrifice." Do you see how that might work?

As we look at our bodies, as we look at our lives, we want to offer every part to God. We have been transformed so that we can offer every part of ourselves to him. We give our bodies, our lives, as living sacrifices, not dead sacrifices, but as living sacrifices to our God. And the way that you do that for God may not look the same as each other.

One of the things I've learned about Transformers is that they are different from each other. One was a Chevy Camaro and another was a truck. Each was different. They had their own special abilities, and yet they were all united.

That's how transformed Christians are, too. You and I are different from each other. Yes, we are different from the world. We no longer follow the schematics of the world, but we are also different from each other. God has made us in different ways. But we use those differences as a united body in service to each other.

Paul describes it like this: **"So by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think in a way that results in sound judgment, as God distributed a measure of faith to each of you. ⁴For we have many members in one body, and not all the members have the same function. ⁵In the same way, though we are many, we are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace God has given us. If the gift is prophecy, do it in complete agreement with the faith. ⁷If it is serving, then serve. If it is teaching, then teach. ⁸If it is encouraging, then encourage. If it is contributing, be generous. If it is leadership, be diligent. If it is showing mercy, do it cheerfully."**

God has made us different from each other. And that's a really good thing. I mean just look at your body. Every part of your body is different from the other parts, even though it is one body. Each part serves for the common good. Right? We have eyes that can distinguish between nutritious food and junk food. We have hands that grab the food and bring it to our mouths. We have teeth that chew the food. We have a tongue that pushes the food around and sends it to the back of our mouths. We have an epiglottis that makes sure the food goes down the esophagus and not the windpipe. We have stomachs that use bile to further break down the food. We have ... okay, I'll stop there... but you get the point. Every part is different, but every part is important.

Paul applies that example to the life of a Christian. The Holy Christian Church, that group of true believers from every place, has different gifts. Some of you are gifted teachers. Some of you give generously. Some of you are natural leaders. Some of you love to serve. Some of you build, cook, make others happy. Some of you know how to say just the right words to encourage others.

We all have different gifts, but each one is important. And we all use those gifts together for one, united purpose and goal. We are transformed to serve.

But remember *why* we serve. We don't serve to get a badge of honor or to get a pat on the back. That's not why we serve. We serve because of a Savior who first came to serve us with his life. He came to make you his own. That's

why we serve. We look for opportunities, no, we see the opportunities that God gives to us and *seize* those opportunities out of love for our Savior Jesus.

You have the gifts. You have the talents. You have the abilities. God has given them to you. Whether it's teaching, encouraging, building, planning, organizing, or singing, please use those gifts in service to our God.

We are transformed. It's more than meets the eye because of the transformation God has done in our lives. But let's not keep it a secret. Let's let our lives as Christians be seen in the way we serve. You are transformed to serve. Amen.