

**First Sunday at Christ Church**  
**July 5, 2009**

It's difficult to know how best to begin your first sermon at a new parish, so let me start with a confession. It's nothing dramatic. I really am who I say I am and I'm not a wanted man in any other states.

It's just that I changed the readings for today. I don't normally do these kinds of things, but the assigned gospel for today was Jesus being rejected in his hometown, and that didn't strike me as a very good theme for my first Sunday, so instead we heard the readings for the Celebration of a New Ministry, which struck me as more appropriate.

We'll use these lessons again when Bishop Michael comes to formally Institute me as Rector, but for today I thought these readings set a better tone as we begin our time together and, by coincidence, the Epistle reading we just heard is one that has been very important to me over many years of my Christian journey, "Brothers and sisters, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...."

I have always been grabbed by that phrase, "be transformed by the renewing of our minds" largely because I have found that the battleground of my Christian life has always been my mind, and my growth as a Christian has always come as a result of my mind being transformed or changed or broadened in some way.

Now let me pause for a moment and clarify what I mean when I talk about the mind. The mind is not the brain. The brain is the lump of yellowy-grayish spongy matter that sits between the ears. We know where it is and we know we don't live without one.

The mind is less tangible. I can't tell you exactly what it is but, believe me, we don't get very far without one of these either. The mind has to do with how we perceive and understand things. How we interpret events and evaluate meaning.

One writer, Gareth O'Callaghan, wrote that the mind is "the spiritual valve that keeps the human brain and body connected to the source of life." I see it a little differently. On the one hand, our brains are physical and we have to live with the relative strengths and weakness of the brains we have been given. On the other hand, life around us is physical and largely uncontrollable, and we have to live with the relative good and bad things that happen to us.

I see the mind as what lies between these two physical and uncontrollable realities. The mind is where we exercise choice, personal power and interpretation. The mind, viewed this way, is how we participate and interact with all that goes on both inside us and outside us. And so, when St. Paul talks about being transformed by the renewing of our minds, he's talking about the choices we make and how we make them, the opinions we hold and how we reached them, and how we find meaning in what goes on around us.

Now, I apologize for being a little too heady for a holiday weekend, but I do believe that the Christian faith has a lot to do with the transformation of our minds. Because, while Christ loves us and accepts us as we are, he never intends to leave us where he found us, but is always calling us more deeply into relationship with God and more deeply into the mystery of becoming our true selves.

This is not far from what Norman Vincent Peale used to talk about with his "Power of Positive Thinking," but the purpose here it is not so much on being positive, but on knowing God's will and having the power to do it. And much of what a transformed mind is like is contained in the rest of that reading.

If you look at the remainder of the Epistle it looks like a running list of admonitions, but they are also areas where most of our minds could use a little transformation. So I'd like to do a little exercise which will help you see the teacher in your new Pastor.

I've broken the reading up into what I'll call the 10 Transformations:

1. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.
2. Love one another with mutual affection.
3. Out do one another in showing honor.
4. Be patient in suffering
5. Persevere in prayer.
6. Contribute to the needs of the saints.
7. Extend hospitality to strangers.
8. Bless those who persecute you.
9. Don't claim to be wiser than you are.
10. Live peaceably with all.

Now I want each of you to pick one thing on this list that you can work on this week, transforming your mind by giving attention to an area that you're not naturally good at.

This is a “no pain, no gain” exercise, because the Christian faith, while often simple, is usually quite difficult. So go ahead, take a moment, look them over, pick one and work on it this week, starting right now.

And if you’re wondering if any of this applies to you, try this little diagnostic test: when was the last time you changed your mind about anything? If it’s been a while then you may have become a little fixed in your opinions, so the time may have come for a little transformation.

Do you want to know what I’ve picked? I’m actually going to combine numbers 1 and 9. “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought” and “Don’t claim to be wiser than you are.” In my mind, these both have to do with working on humility, which is about having a realistic understanding of my place in the universe before God. I’m the new pastor of this wonderful congregation, but I’ve been ordained for 17 years and may have an inflated opinion of how I do my work, so I’m going to focus on humility while I spend this time getting to know and a love all of you.

And, if you think about it, all 10 transformations require us to get over ourselves in some way so that we can learn to see people the way God sees us; as lovable flawed children who need help. So go ahead and pick one, work on it and ... “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.” Amen