

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² 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.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

I have a vivid memory of a conversation that occurred the day before I met my husband, Brad. I was training for my summer job after my sophomore year of college, and I had just received a list of who I would be working with during various weeks throughout the summer. It appeared I would be spending the first

two weeks with the same supervisor. I asked someone who had been around a few years, "Hey, what do you know about Brad Fuerst?" "You're working with Brad Fuerst?" he replied, and then he just gave this sort of...knowing chuckle. And then he tagged this onto the end: "Get ready for a wild ride."

At the time, I wasn't quite sure what he meant. Now, after 13 years, 9 wedding anniversaries, 2 graduate degrees, 9 moves, and 3 kids, I think HE wasn't quite sure what he meant. How could I have possibly known what chapter would unfold in my life the next day? Back that up--when I went searching for and chose that particular summer job in the summer of 2001, how could I have known how important that would be--how much it would shape the next years of my life?

My ethics professor in seminary is known for saying that if we all really knew what we were getting ourselves into when we stood at the altar on our wedding day, we might think twice. His point is not that marriage is awful, but simply that we cannot possibly have any fullness of understanding about what that relationship and journey will be like, and who we will become in it, how it will transform us.

I'd say a lot of decisions are that way. A philosopher named L.A. Paul has studied these sorts of big decisions; she calls them "epistemically transformative" decisions. She writes, "Sometimes, you can't know what something is like until you try it. You can't know what vegemite tastes like, for example, until you try Vegemite; you can't know what having children will be like until you have children. You can guess what these things will be like; you can ask people; you can draw up lists of pros and cons; but, at the end of the day, "without having the

experience itself" you "cannot even have an approximate idea as to what it is like to have that experience." That's because you won't just be having the experience; the experience will be changing you. On the other side, you will be a different kind of person."

Transformation is a sneaky thing. Sometimes it happens all at once, like someone turns a key inside of us and suddenly everything is different--WE are different. More often, I would say that it happens over time; it seems that in most cases, either we are unaware of transformation as it is taking place in our lives, or we are painfully aware of it, because the change is hard-wrought.

As Paul reaches this point in his epic letter to the Romans, this point where he tells them not to conform, but to be transformed, he takes a turn. You see, for eleven chapters, Paul has been waxing theological. He has been outlining for the Christians just who Jesus is, and why he matters. It's a full explanation of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. And then in chapter twelve, verse one, he takes a turn: Therefore, brothers and sisters...therefore. For eleven chapters Paul has been giving them theology--now he moves to answer the question, "So what? What now, if all of this that I have told you about God and Jesus Christ is true, then what now?"

And Paul's first move, his first answer to that question--that so-what question--is this: everything must change. Therefore, he says, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, present your bodies (and the greek word here is SOMA, it really means present your whole selves as a living sacrifice. A living sacrifice. It's a paradox,

you see: a sacrifice is normally something dead, something slaughtered and burned on the altar as an offering to God, but Paul says to bring this sacrifice alive. You are going to live, but you see, something in you is going to have to die.

This is what he means when he says "Do not conform to this world, but be transformed..."

With all of the houses around here being remodeled, we all get lots of mail advertising the services of remodeling companies. Right? Do you get these ads and flyers in the mail? So one came this week for a company that works with cabinets, and it said, "Don't replace...reface!" That's the temptation, isn't it? To think that we just need refacing--we just need a new veneer, a change that we can do ourselves, something that doesn't require too much mess, something we can find in the self-help section, something that doesn't require ripping out the old cabinets--I like to think that all I really need is for someone to just come in real quick and flip this house. But Paul says that God wants to take it all the way down to the studs. God's got a dumpster waiting outside, and he's ready to work some REAL transformation in your life.

Lord knows, our world needs more than just a refacing. I know for me, lately it's hard to make it through the end of the news with any hope left. I had a friend who had a leak in her house--she knew it because she had wet drywall, soaked through so much that her hand went right through it. And as she pulled it away, she found more damage behind it. And so she followed that up the wall, and there was more. Everywhere they turned, there was more damage, and they kept

thinking "surely at some point here, we are going to find the source of the leak," but for a long time they just kept finding more damage, and more damage. Our world seems to have the same problem. Everywhere we turn, more damage; and behind the damage, more damage. Just single words are enough: Ebola, Israel, Palestine, ISIS, Ferguson. And those are just the latest ones; nevermind the ongoing crises of poverty and food shortage, of human slavery in the sex industry and the service industry. Our church's mission is to make followers of Jesus Christ who transform the community and the world through God's love. The truth is, sometimes is hard to imagine what we even hope for--it's hard to see the possibility of a transformed community and transformed world with all this damage around.

The trouble, and the hard part, is to accept that the world's brokenness is connected to my brokenness, and your brokenness--what's messed up in the world, is messed up in me, too. But here's the promise: neither we nor the world are beyond God's transformation. When we are at our worst, at the lowest possible point--when we have again done the thing that we swore we would never do again; when we have hurt the ones we love or long to love; when we are sure that we are too deep in loneliness, or guilt, or grief, or pain, when we seem to have become a tear-down kind of house--the kind that simply can't be redeemed...God is near. And that God is the God who makes all things new. That is the God who said, "Look, I am about to do a new thing, to make a way in the wilderness, a river in the desert!" (Isaiah 43:19) That God is the God that Paul was talking about when he said "If anyone is in Christ, BAM! New Creation!" Not just HE is a new creation, but "new creation"--all of creation is made new.

Friends, it is an audacious hope that we sign on for here, this hope that we and the world can be transformed. It is the kind of hope that believes that providing school supplies for children in need may brighten more than just their day--it may brighten all of our future because of what God will set in motion in that child's life. It's the kind of hope that looks around at the world, at broken, hurting people, and broken systems, and says, "Yep, I think I better go to medical school, or nursing school." It's the kind of hope that says "I'm going to take this step--I'm going to sign up for this study, or join the choir, or go on this retreat, or give beyond what I think I can, I'm going to take this step and open myself to the possibility that that step, that decision, that relationship may be the thing God uses to transform me, or to transform someone else. I'm going to take that step, because I'm just audacious enough to think that on the other side of it, I will be a different kind of person."

Do not conform to this world--to the refacing, the promise of change that will cost you nothing; but be transformed--be made new by the very one who made you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Summary: In Romans 12, Paul calls for a full transformation of our lives—for something within us to die and be created anew. Even in the worst moments of our lives, and even in the darkest places in our world, God's transforming presence gives us hope for a new day.