

Transformed!

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

(Romans 12:2 NIV)

In the name of the One who is the Resurrection and the Life, who has given each of us life and who has called us all to protect and promote God’s gift of life, dear friends:

[The minister can begin with his own personal situation regarding a life issue crisis, circumstance, or counseling issue in his ministry work. The sermon author started with his situation which could be adapted for use:]

During my senior year at the seminary I reviewed books and pamphlets and other pro-life materials for Christian Life Resources (back then it was still called WELS Lutherans for Life). And I learned so much about life issues from the staff during that year.

But the person who shared this particular insight with me isn’t as important as the insight itself. I remember being told: “As a young pastor, you will undoubtedly have opportunities to preach about life issues. And like many congregations, yours will probably celebrate a Life Sunday. When you do, when you put together the service, when you talk about God’s gift of life, when you correctly condemn the sin of taking a human life in the womb before it has a chance to be born, remember this: there is a good chance that some of the people in the pews, some of your own members, have had an abortion.”

I filed away that piece of advice for future reference, and I didn’t think about it again...until Heather (not her real name) came into my office a few years later. I didn’t know Heather all that well, but what I did know about her I liked. She worked for a member of our congregation, and he invited her to church. She came and later enrolled in our Bible Information Class, and she eventually became a member. Heather didn’t have the easiest life growing up, but she had persevered. She had a good job. She had found a place to put down her spiritual roots. Humanly speaking, she had every right to be proud of what she had accomplished.

But that afternoon in my office, Heather wasn’t the least bit proud of what she had done. Instead she was ashamed. Early on in the conversation I could tell that something wasn’t quite right. And with tears in her eyes, she told me what was wrong. When Heather was younger, she had had an abortion. I don’t remember the details. What I do remember is the look on her face. She was so sad, so burdened, so broken.

It was my privilege to assure Heather that Jesus was there to pick up the pieces. I told her that Jesus still loved her. I told her that God had forgiven her sins, all her sins, including that sin. She left my office feeling better, like that burden had been lifted. But we decided not to leave it there.

Heather and I worked with a counselor at the local CLR branch to set up a small memorial service to remember her child and rejoice in God's love. I can still picture the three of us sitting together in that huge sanctuary. And I remember that the mood in that space was much different from our previous meeting in my office. There were still a few tears, but Heather was doing much better. There was a time in her life when she had been in a very different place. There was a time in her life when she made decisions that she had come to deeply regret. But thanks to Jesus she had found peace. Because of Jesus her life had been...transformed.

It's a compelling story, but it is by no means unique. I am sure that many of you here today likely have your own stories. So many opportunities to serve. So many opportunities to share God's love. Each one a blessing! Each one a privilege! Each one a miracle!

But the greatest miracle isn't these heartwarming stories with happy endings. The greatest miracle isn't what God has done and continues to do through us. The most important miracle is the miracle God has worked in us. Because we needed our hearts to be transformed just as much as [Heather] did. Because we have all made choices in life that we regret. Because our default setting is to conform to the pattern of this sinful world.

Watch the news. Look at the latest polling data. Talk to your neighbor. It won't take you long to figure out that when it come to life issues, Christians are swimming upstream. Have you ever tried to do that? Have you ever tried to literally swim upstream? It's hard. It can be exhausting. And even if you get after it, even if you swim your hardest for a prolonged period of time, when you pop your head out of the water you will discover that you haven't made much progress, or even worse, that you have actually lost ground.

Sound familiar? For the last three and half decades, Christian Life Resources and its affiliates and volunteers have worked hard. They have stood up for the truth. They have spoken up for those who can't speak for themselves. But how much progress has been made? Abortion is more restricted than it used to be, but it remains the law of the land. When it comes to end of life issues, more people and more states are embracing euthanasia and physician-assisted-suicide as legitimate, even compassionate, choices.

Let's be honest. Our task is daunting, and if you look at the outward evidence, if you see the direction our culture is heading, it can be very discouraging. So, what should we do? Should we isolate and insulate ourselves from the outside world? Should we admit defeat and retrench for the next battle? Or maybe we should give up and go home and take a nap?

That's not the answer. I think you know the answer. And if you aren't sure, Paul gives us the answer: **"Do not conform to the pattern of this world."** Don't give up. Don't give in. Do not raise your hands in surrender. Be transformed! **"Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."**

Maybe you are thinking to yourself: "I appreciate the pep talk, Paul, but I am going to need a little more than that. I know that I need to be transformed, but there is no way I can affect that kind of spiritual transformation. I'm not some kind of caterpillar that can spin a cocoon around myself and emerge as a butterfly. I'm a sinner. I can't stop sinning. So, I can't do it. I can't transform myself. I need someone else to transform me."

There is someone who can help. There is only one person who is able to transform hearts and lives, and we can rely on him because he was transformed too. In fact, the same Greek word found in Romans 12:2 is used to describe Jesus in the gospels. Except when the word refers to Jesus, it is translated "transfigured," not "transformed."

Do you remember the story? Jesus took Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain where they met Moses and Elijah, where the Lord gave his disciples a glimpse of his glory. His face was radiant. His clothes were as white as lightning. And on that mountain top Jesus gave his disciples of all time a powerful object lesson: this man is no mere man. He possesses divine power and glory. And if he can transfigure himself, he can certainly transform us.

It was important for the disciples to remember that encounter when his glory was hidden again, when Jesus was later convicted of crimes he didn't commit, when he looked weak and helpless on the cross. It is important for us to remember that hidden glory too, when our spiritual enemies appear to be advancing, when it feels like we are fighting a losing battle, when our labor seems to be in vain.

That glory may not be visible to the naked eye, but it's there. The power may remain hidden from view, but it's there. It is always there. The Word we share might look like it is landing on hard ground, but from our own experience we know that God's Spirit and God's promises are there. The Word works faith in our own hearts to believe that our Savior has risen, that our sins have been forgiven, that our God is ruling over all things, that we have a home waiting for us in heaven.

And the God whose love has transformed us compels us to share our hope with the world, with people who are hurting and struggling, with people who are alone and afraid, with people who don't know what to do or regret what they have done, with people like my friend [Heather] and countless others who need to experience God's forgiving love.

And so this is not the time to long for the good old days. This is not the time to say we had a good run and move on. It is good and right to give thanks for the blessings of the past, but we dare not dwell on it because we have work to do. We have more souls to reach. We have a powerful message to proclaim, a transformational message that gives people hope, a message that celebrates God's gift of life, the only message that gives eternal life. Amen.