

I wonder if you're feeling what I'm feeling these days. There is a buoyant optimism, a less worried openness amongst us that's hard to put my finger on. I see people laughing the kind of laugh that's free, honest. I see people reaching beyond the usual circles to embrace others. I see people less afraid. I see people making hard decisions about their resources so they can support the Somethin's Gonna Happen Financial campaign. I see people thinking about their role in the Fall Fair. I see people excited about singing and offering leadership like you saw this morning. In fact...the power point presentation...wasn't that awesome. Every single one of those pictures was a story about someone's commitment, someone's love, someone's sense of call to serving the church.

What I see is a congregation shaking off some cobwebs; a congregation coming to realize that the church does not exist to serve itself, it exists to serve its community. I see a group of people both excited, and cautious about its future. It's going to take every one of us to make that future happen. It's going to take each of us bringing who we are – our energy, our gifts, our resources, our faith – to ensure that the future we imagine in the booklet we prepared for the campaign will unfold.

I think mostly what I'm noticing is that this congregation is undergoing its own transformation. You've probably heard me say this before, but I remember reading the Joint Needs Assessment Report two years ago and the outcome of your interim ministry. Do you remember describing yourselves as Elizabeth? The single grandma concerned about her future, concerned about her grandchildren. It was a good image, on a particular day when a particular group of people gathered to undertake a particular interim ministry exercise. But the problem with those kinds of exercises which lead to those kinds of images is that they run the risk of freeze framing the congregation. The minute we say "this is who I am, we are..." we risk remaining stuck there.

And for some, as we began to make the changes we needed to make in our governance, in our sanctuary, in our programming, in our understanding of ourselves, and our commitment to the future, Elizabeth is who we wanted to remain. Please don't hear this as judgment. It happens when we do what happened on that particular day, with that particular group, with that particular exercise. We feel good about who we "are" we can put our fingers on that. But we get really afraid of who we might become, we can't see it, can't imagine it, can't trust it.

Let me say that after nearly two years of really important work, in my mind Elizabeth is not who you are at all. There has been a deep and compelling transformation. The campaign team met this week to talk about where things are. And I'm not giving anything away. But what I do know is that Celebration Sunday on September 11 is going to be a great day in the life of this congregation and if you aren't here, you will miss something important. This growing optimism, this growing sense of call and purpose and risk taking, has been bubbling in the living rooms and dining rooms of all those people who have been visited. And what is happening here is what Paul calls the church in Rome to experience.

If anything, according to what we know of Jesus, and clearly what Paul writes to the church in Rome, this faith, this Christian enterprise, this life of Jesus that we pursue is about personal and corporate transformation. If we're not leading people into Spirit's work of changing their lives which invokes change in our communities, the church is not doing what it's supposed to be doing; at least according to the way I read Paul.

First he calls us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice...that is to say...we present everything...not just some of who we...all of us. Our whole lives become the living sacrifice in response to God's infinite mercy. We say this all the time. When we invite you to make your tithes and offerings every Sunday, it's not because we want you to pay for something. We invite you into the basic response of every Christian – we have been given everything...our first response is to give everything back. Not just some of who we are – our skills, our knowledge, our money, our volunteer time. The appropriate response as followers of Jesus living transformed lives by God's mercy is to give everything. We turn our lives and follow.

Paul adds a second idea. Following the reality of Jesus is a counter culture act. Not only do we give our lives, we do it in the face of the culture around us. Do not be conformed to this world, he writes, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so you can discern what is the will of God. Paul is saying, as Christians we turn our attention to the things that God is concerned about, not how the culture around us has ordered our living.

Paul is speaking directly to individual members of the church in Rome who thought they were above or beyond the messiness of transformation. Paul is saying, following Jesus is a counter culture activity. Period. We are called into our own personal transformation that leads us beyond our complacency and our thinking that we don't have to move outside our comfort zones. Jesus is not at the center of our comfortable lives, Jesus is at the edges, the margins of comfort, where grace and beauty meet anxiety and trouble.

Nothing about following Jesus is comfortable. But it will give your life back. Following Jesus means going to those places of mission and service, healing and seeking justice that we'd rather not go. This community has discerned what that means for us. There is nothing comfortable about what we believe we're called to do. But without exception, each of you have heard the story of where we are going, and each of you has responded, in deep and profound generosity. Not equal gifts, equal sacrifice.

That's what Paul is on about. He isn't suggesting for a minute that all our gifts are the same. He lists lots of ways the community of faith will be different from one another. That would be crazy. But he does insist at the very outset that each of us presents our bodies, our lives – everything we have been given.

And that's what's happened here. We are being transformed by the renewing of our minds as we have discerned what is the will of God. This can't be just for some of us, our future depends on every one of us responding. And what is remarkable...as we see in the final days of our campaign, is that you have.

I am excited about inviting you to celebration Sunday on September 11. The financial outcome is just a small indication of how God is working miracles amongst us, and how we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds. The transformation is not just financial; we are becoming risk takers for the sake of the gospel. Friends, Paul was not just writing to Rome in this passage from his letter, he is now speaking to the very heart of our community. Amen.