

“It’s Morphing Time”

Part 1 – The Life You’ve Always Wanted

Romans 12: 1-2; I Timothy 4: 7-8



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Starting today and continuing for the next six weeks we as a congregation will be embarking on a special journey. Through Sunday morning worship services and in small group settings each of us will have an opportunity to think about the state of our spiritual lives and ask ourselves these questions: Am I living life the way Jesus would if he was here in my world? Am I living the life I’ve always wanted? Think for a moment about the change that could occur in your thoughts, actions, and relationships if you could respond positively to these two questions. Think of the joy and freedom that could transform every area of your life. That is exactly what God has in mind for you.

The good news of the Christian faith is that the transformation of the human personality really is possible. It is never easy. It is rarely quick. But it is possible. When our children were young kids they were enthralled by a group of teenage super heroes called the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers.

This TV show that dominated the interests of most six year olds in the US was an unlikely hit. It was originally produced on a very low budget in Japan, then badly dubbed into English. The key to the show’s appeal was the character’s ability to “morph”. With the rallying cry, “It’s morphin’ time!” normal adolescents were miraculously transformed into martial arts heroes for justice. The show was such a huge hit that the term morph began creeping into magazine articles and everyday conversations.

Does the word morph sound vaguely familiar to you? It is part of metamorphosis, a word about the process of transformation. Like the process of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. The little word morph actually comes from one of the richest Greek words in the New Testament—morphoo—which means to form, shape or fashion. It was a term used to describe the formation and growth of an embryo in a mother’s body. Paul used this word in his letter to the Galatians: “until Christ is formed in you.” Another form of the word appears when Paul says, “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Cor. 3:18). It is not just six year olds who want to morph. The desire of transformation is deep in the heart of every human being.

The goal of spiritual transformation is to live as if Jesus held unhindered sway over your body. Of course, it is still you doing the living— your temperament, your gene pool, your history. But to grow spiritually means to increasingly live as Jesus would in your unique place—to see what Jesus would see if he looked through your eyes, to think what he would think, to feel what he would feel, and, therefore, to do what he would do.

Over time, an amazing thing can happen. You find yourself beginning to want to live this way. It appeals to you. It makes sense. You no longer want to simply “do right things”; instead you want to become the right kind of person. Transformation is a holy and mysterious process. It doesn’t happen quickly, neatly, or predictably. But the promise of Scripture is that ordinary people can receive power for extraordinary change. Transformation is about the God who says, “I love you just the way you are. I cannot love you any more. But I also love you too much to leave you like you are.”

In Romans 12: 1-2 Paul points to one of the greatest obstacles in our path to transformation. He reminds us of the power of the culture around us to shape us according to its values. And what are those values? They are the same values that cultures throughout the history of humankind have held. Values like the triumph of the powerful, the influence of the wealthy, and the prestige of the successful. It is hard not to see almost every sphere in human life being dominated by these strong cultural pulls. Children from a very early age are taught that the goal in life is to be successful, (as the world defines success) by getting the best grades in school, by competing well in high powered sports, by getting into the best colleges and securing a successful career. We all know how the world tilts toward the wealthy and the powerful. These are the ones that the world lifts up for us all to admire and aspire to be like.

But listen again to the apostle Paul, “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. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Was Jesus successful, in the way our culture would define success? Was he wealthy or powerful as we understand those words? No, and so what might the life of Jesus look like in our world today? How would a transformed person act like in the world we live in?

Let me give you an example from a story that Gwen Wildfong shared at our deacon’s meeting in December. The story is called, “What Life is All About”. At the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally challenged, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back.....then they all turned around and went back....everyone of them!

One girl with Down’s Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, “This will make it better.” Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes.

People who were there are still telling the story...Why? Because deep down we know this one thing. What matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What matters is helping others win, even if it means slowing down and changing our course. No one stands as tall as when they reach down to help someone else up.

Now we can't live in the world like this simply by trying harder. We can't act and love and touch others with the heart of Jesus just by willpower alone. Becoming transformed people takes something else. John Ortberg, in the small group material we are using and the author of the book, "The Life You've Always Wanted," reminds us that if we are serious about spiritual transformation we must not merely "try harder," we must "train wisely."

Athletics was a familiar imagery to the apostle Paul's audience. Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics in prominence in ancient Greece. Paul himself had probably been in Corinth during the games of A.D. 51 and may have even made tents for the visitors and contestants needing accommodations. Everyone knew that any athlete entering these games was required to undergo strict training for ten months and could be disqualified for failure to do so. Certainly this is the background for Paul's words to the Corinthians that "athletes exercise self control in all things," and his words to his young friend Timothy to "train yourself in godliness." The need for training is not confined only to athletics. Training is required for people who want to play a musical instrument or learn a new language or run a business. Indeed, it is required for any significant challenge in life, including spiritual transformation and growth. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano.

To follow Jesus means learning to arrange our life around those practices that will enable us to stay connected to him and to enable him to fill us with his life and spirit so that we can live more and more like he did. In short, this is just another way of defining the ancient practices of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are any activities that can help us gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.

Proven by followers of Jesus over the centuries, the spiritual disciplines are exercises that strengthen our spiritual lives and gift us with change and spiritual transformation. That is why we are going to be focusing on several of these important disciplines for the next few weeks.

Unfortunately, for many people, the very concept of spiritual disciplines has been grossly distorted. So I'd like to clear up a few things before we go any further. First, spiritual disciplines are not a barometer of spirituality. The ultimate indicator of our spiritual health is our capacity to fully love God and love people. Spiritual disciplines are never ends in themselves, only means to a greater end. Second, spiritual disciplines are not a way to earn "brownie points" with God. They are not about gaining God's forgiveness and good will. And they are not "exact credit." They have value only insofar as they keep us vitally connected with Christ and empowered to live as he lived. Third, a disciplined person is not necessarily someone who does a lot of disciplines. It is not a highly systematic, rigidly scheduled, chart-making, gold-star loving early riser. A disciplined person is one who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit. A disciplined person is one who discerns when laughter, or gentleness, or silence or healing words or truth telling is called for and offers it promptly, effectively, and in love.

Fourth spiritual disciplines are not only about certain practices. Certainly, some foundational practices like prayer, solitude, and scripture meditation are critically important. But all of life's activities can become spiritual training exercises if we allow them to. It all counts. Every moment of life, at least potentially – is an opportunity to be guided by God into God's way of living. Sitting in traffic congestion can become a training exercise in patience. Mundane activities like cleaning the house or taking a shower can train our hearts in gratitude, if we use those opportunities to thank God for God's care. Delighting in nature can train our hearts in joy. Even sleep can be a spiritual discipline. Disciplining ourselves to get a good night's sleep can train us away from anxiety and toward trust if we remind ourselves that the world is in God's hands and it will get along very well even though we're not awake to control everything.

Finally, let me speak to one last question, "What is God's role in spiritual growth?" To speak of spiritual growth only as a product of training can make it sound like something that can be controlled and engineered by us. John Ortberg addresses this question by asking us to think about the difference between piloting a motorboat and a sailboat. We can run a motorboat all by ourselves. All we have to do is start the engine. We are in control. But a sailboat is a different story. We can hoist the sails. We can steer the rudder. But we are utterly dependent on the wind. Our job is simply to do those things that will enable us to catch the wind when it comes.

Spiritual transformation is like piloting a sailboat. Our job is to creatively and wisely engage in those activities that will give God a chance to work in our life. This can look different in different seasons in our life. We can put up the sails and adjust them as needed. But we can not engineer the wind. That is up to God.

I want to invite each of you to enter into this exciting journey for the next six weeks, as we explore together the life we have always wanted. If you are not already in a small group, talk to Lori Sweeney or Pastor Tom, and they can get you connected to a little community of people who desire to grow spiritually and support each other in that journey. Make it a priority to be in worship each week as we together address these critical issues. Jesus came with the gracious announcement that it is possible to be changed. It is possible to live in such a way that people see you and say, "Wow! I didn't know that a life could look like that." If you believe this is really true or that it might be true or at least you want it to be true then hear Jesus' invitation to you: "Follow me."

Let us pray:

God, we long to be the people you have created us to be. Work your miracle of transformation in us, and then through us transform this whole world with your love and grace. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.