

Transformed in Prayer
Menno Mennonite Church
September 6, 2020

Purpose: To expand the range of means and methods of prayer

Message: The purpose of prayer is ultimately developing our personal relationship with God to whom we pray.

Scripture: Romans 12:1-8

Synopsis: As people of a separate allegiance, we are indeed called to being 'other' within the world. This sense of otherness is often thought to be an ethnic marker, a behavioral change for the sake of bearing a marking of being different. At least that is how we have interpreted it.

But what if it is really that second part of the opening--being transformed by the renewing of our minds-- that is to set us apart. That is the work of pray, and a function of the Spirit in our lives. It can be a challenge to understand what transformation might be like, and that can be scary.

Our prayer lives often have a lot more to do with what we ask than how we are transformed. Yet the work of the spirit is around us always and calls us to new life no matter what our stage. Our difference is less a marker of achievement or a regimen of force to ensure compliance with the rules of faith, but to bring us more and more into the way and the will of spirit in our lives. We bring ourselves into contrast by way of our practices and we need to remember that the practice is not the point of piety itself, but to enable the working of spirit in our lives.

[Spiritual detours](#)

[Transformed Lives - Nav Neighbors](#)

[Where we stand Luke 18:9-14](#)

[Be ye not conformed Spiritual formation 3 romans 8 1-8 10-16-2011.docx](#)

[Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy Kingdom come, Thy will](#)

[Where are you God reader theater_ AZCYF2009.doc](#)

Romans 12:1-8 (NIV)

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Therefore,
I urge you, brothers and sisters,
in view of God's mercy,
to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and pleasing to God—

this is your true and proper worship.

² 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—

God's good, pleasing and perfect will.

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you:
Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought,

but rather think of yourself with sober judgment,
in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members,
and these members do not all have the same function,
⁵ so in Christ we, though many,
form one body, and each member belongs to all the others

. ⁶ We have different gifts,
according to the grace given to each of us.
If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;

⁷ if it is serving, then serve;
if it is teaching, then teach;

⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement;
if it is giving, then give generously;
if it is to lead, do it diligently;
if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

There are things that I never really thought about before becoming a dad. The list is quite incredibly long. Time and again my children have the ability to amaze with the stuff that they can think of to do or to question that never remotely crossed my mind. Some of the basic things of life have to be explained (we are at the why stage of the of things, and I think among the reasons that Emily is glad to be home is the simple expediency of being able to say “go ask your dad.” It never ceases to surprise what needs to be taught, often many times, including that which we take for granted. Like knowing how, and why we pray. We have been sharing the prayer for the evening meal via video for months now, and we always have to be sure to explain why we pause to give thanks before we dive in and eat up. At the moment we do best with an energetic song or going around and saying one thing that we are thankful for terminated with a yelled “AMEN” just to make sure God hears it, I suppose. They seem to gravitate to Johnny Appleseed; I think because they like seeing us do an enthusiastic O over our heads and try our best to invite them to at least, clap if not sing along.

But we have all been there. We have all needed to learn to pray and the how and why of it all. Most of us learn about prayer in a very simplistic way. We come at the end of the day and present ourselves before God, asking that God might take care of us and the things that we care for. To pray is ask something that you want. You want your Mom and Dad to give you a pony? You pray that God would make them get you a pony. You want Grandpa to get better? You pray for healing and hope that it comes. But it does not take us that long to figure out that just because you ask for it, does not mean that it is going to happen. Sometimes, even when we pray in our most sincere way we know how, things don't materialize in the way that we wish them to. We wonder what went wrong. We asked. We Prayed. Nothing happened. We try to fill this with easy answers of God's will being different than our own, and that sometimes the answer is no.

Despite the fact that this happens to be true, it is not a satisfying explanation of how prayer works, or why sometimes it appears to fail. We can get frustrated with the easy answers, and either accept them as good enough for what they are, or abandon the project of prayer for all functional purposes as a nice idea, but not really something for the like of us. This is often where we stay. This is the breadth and width of prayer for us, especially if we are not given to think of ourselves as contemplatives. Spending hours in prayer is not what we are given to idealize—or we think since we can't pull that off, we can't pray. We pray because we should, but we are not

particularly comfortable doing so. We might still pray, maybe even using the same old forms, but we become less expectant of results, less comforted by the interaction, and less certain that this whole prayer thing is all that big of deal in the first place. Will get back here in a minute.

Our text from Romans is an old Mennonite favorite. Be not conformed to this world, yes, that is what we are all about. If you go digging about in the original Anabaptist writings, you will see a good amount of this. We want to be different. We hold up being different and living our faith as our witness, our prayer. Each of us have our heroes of non-conformity, though this too has become increasingly stressed as we have needed to let go of the traditional markers of how we dress and what we drive and find new ways to incarnate our faith that doesn't involve the menu we serve.

We gravitate to the non-conformity because we want to be different from 'the world.' We value what we do, how we live—rightly so. We pray in doing, it is often said. The beauty of our tradition is that it so closely marries what you say you believe and what you do. But as is often the case, it is our very strength that can also lead to our weakness. We like the first part of what Paul is commanding here that we can stop reading. We get so set on our behavior and what it represents, and our ability to perform good Godly acts, we can forget what that behavior must be rooted in. We forget to the second part: Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Be changed by the changing of your minds so you can discern the will of God. Now that is a different matter altogether. That takes something different than just mandating what I do and what I do not do, what I wear and what I do not wear, how we exist, how much we swear in public and when. The stuff that we know and love. Be transformed asks for something differently entirely.

Which brings us back to prayer. This is tied into how we pray because we do the same thing in our expectations regarding the life of prayer. The exact same thing. Most of the time we see prayer as an activity of conformity. We pray in order to conform to the long list of stuff that Christian people do. We pray to try to bring the way of God into line with the way we want to see the world, what we want to have happen in the world. It's like we expect God to have a tally sheet and if we get enough names on our petition, enough voices to break through the noise, we will change God's mind and make things happen. Most of the time it is God who we are trying to change when we pray. How, I wonder how do we build a holy habit of prayer that goes beyond a simple should (I ought to do this) or a juvenile rhyme of prayer, but develops our way

of being with God and in God to do what prayer must do: become the foundational element of our relationship with the Most High? Where do we start? How do we even begin with something as big as this?

At the end of the day, we do not expect to change when we pray. We do not expect transformation. But that is what we are invited to each and every day. Mother Teresa puts it well saying ‘Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting yourself in the hands of God, at God’s disposition, and listening to his voice in the depths of our hearts.’ Praying ourselves into the hands of God is coming to encounter God on the most basic and true ways we can, to know and be known in the most real way possible. Praying in expectation of transformation asks us to take a step out of mere conformity, mere expectation of receiving, of voicing again who I am and what I want. Praying with a mind toward transformation removes the point of prayer from simply conformity and points toward something else entirely.

All of this makes fine a speech, you are thinking, but very little real sense. So how do we go about do this? There is no ready formula to be followed, I am sorry to say. I could spend the whole year exploring this, and many others have spent decades to figure this out. But I do have a several general points to help us to begin to think about prayer from a transformative perspective.

First, there is a need for freedom. We often limit our prayer into a fairly narrow ideas of what it looks like and how it works—now I lay me down to sleep with hands folded and eyes closed. If this works for you, great—do it. If it doesn’t don’t; but find what does. Find the place and the means that allows you to get out yourself, out of your thoughts, out of your lists long enough to find a different way of thinking. I like to go driving out in the middle of nowhere not because I want to waste gas, or get into weird places, but when I am driving, I am able to empty my mind sufficiently enough to encounter God. I drive to pray. I need to leave things behind long enough to change my thinking to pray. Maybe you walk to pray, meditate your way across the fields, listen to music to pray. Whatever it is, find what works for you and do it. And persist in it. But always know that it is prayer. Paul refers to this different gifting in our text—that there are different ways in which God works in a person. Find your habit and name the prayerful purpose that it has to maintain that. We must remember that there are just as many ways to pray, and allow ourselves to relish our means of prayer. We must free ourselves to find our way to pray.

Second, there is a need for quiet. By quiet I do not necessarily mean the religious hush with nothing going on. But you need to quiet yourself, your thoughts, your anxieties enough to be quiet. And this is much more and internal thing than necessarily an external quiet (though that too helps). Find ways to let go of yourself long enough for God to come in, and to meet you in the silence. We are bombarded inside and out with messages all day long. We need to come away from this to be renewed in our minds and thoughts, to encounter God. This takes practice. My personality type has a prayer that goes something like ‘dear God, thank you for this day. Thank you for—hey look a bird ...’. We all have our ways of distancing ourselves from the quiet within. We resist silence because we don’t know what will come up. But we must find it in order to find the transformational purpose of prayer.

Third, there is a need for patience. Transformation of our mind is not something that comes readily. We will not get to it in three easy steps, or in a week’s discipline. It may take a long time for us to even find quiet in the first place (that is a tough one). It may take us a long time for us hear the voice within us, let alone to begin to discern what it might be saying to us. God’s ability to bring transforming truth to us depends on our ability to hear, respond, and act. We may not be ready. God may not be ready. Yet even our willingness to look for transformation, look for God within and around, will change us, will move us, and will, in time, transform us.

There is no recipe to prayer. There is no prescription for transformation. I cannot teach prayer in a single sermon or in any number of sermons, and I would be a fool to try. It is something that must grow within.

But I do know this. We want to change the world. We want to be different from the world. And we must do that. But we must remember why it is that we want to be different. We must remember that we are being transformed into more and more Christ like people. It is only in that transformation that changing the world makes any sense. Action without contemplation is just one more ego trip, one more way for us to live how we who we think we want to be, and not who we really are in God. We must read the whole gospel of transformation, both personal and social, for the world to be made ever new.

Be not conformed; but be transformed: May this be ever our challenge and our call,
Amen.