

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**305 EAST MAIN STREET**  
**DURHAM, NC 27701**  
**PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Essential, But Invisible”**

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
Deuteronomy 11: 18-21; Romans 12: 1-8

**August 24, 2008**

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“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Conforming to the pattern of this world

reminds me of one of my all-time favorite childhood toys,  
the Play-Doh Fun Factory.

Do you remember how it worked?

You would feed the soft magenta-pink or cerulean-blue play-doh

into a trough at the top of the device, press down hard on the lever,  
and out through a mold would come long ropes of play-doh,  
or bars or plusses ,

or best of all, plates full of colored spaghetti,

which you could cut with your serrated plastic knife,

or braid, or serve to your dolls or pets

as gourmet food.

Or you could insert a template into the vice,

press out all the excess play-doh, trim the edges with the knife,

and out would come a pink dog, or a yellow cat,

or an orange chicken.

It was so fun to create something out of nothing;

to form shapeless matter into the images of real objects:

logs, snakes, spaghetti, dogs, cats, or chickens.

It's was so easy to mold matter externally to conform to patterns of this world.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,"

the Apostle Paul tells the church members in Rome.

This first Greek verb which Paul uses here, which we translate as "conform",

means to adopt or imitate a pose, or to mold after something,

or to receive a mode of conduct...from this world, in this case.

Don't do that, Paul says! Don't go there! Resist being play-doh people,

pretty to look at, but easily molded by *external things* of this world,

like credit-card consumerism, or cut-throat competition, or high fashion,

or prosperity-gospel theology, or peer-pressure, or gossip,

or billable hours, or video-game violence, or plastic surgery,

or cell phone availability,

or entitled behavior; the list is extensive.

Resist adopting the ways of this world, or imitating the poses of this world,

or being molded after the things of this world,

or receiving our mode of conduct from this world,

or else we all may turn out to be little more than doughy logs, snakes,

spaghetti, cats, dogs or chickens.

For these external things do not nurture our *inner essential*,

those things invisible to the eye which allow us to discern

and to live according to God's will in pleasing ways.

In Antoine Saint-Exupery's fable *The Little Prince*, near the end of the story,

a fox shares with the little prince his secret for life.

This is what the fox says:

"One sees clearly only with the heart.

Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.

It's the time you spent on your rose that makes your rose so important." (p. 63)

Presbyterian theologian Fred Rogers was fond of speaking of

every person's, every adult's and every child's, inner essential.

He explained it as "that part of you that knows that life

is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch.

That deep part of you that allows you

to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive:

love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war,

and justice that proves more powerful than greed."

(Fred McFeely Rogers, 2002 Commencement Address at Dartmouth College)

And so it is in God's world, with God's people:

the things that should mold us and form us are internal things,

invisible to the eyes of humanity, but pleasing to the eyes of God.

And as the fox tells the little prince,

the time spent on our inner essential

makes our inner essential so important.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,

but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," Paul says.

This verse, by the way, was my mantra in seminary;

the verse that kept me going when times got tough.

As I was slogging through Old Testament and New Testament survey,

Hebrew and Greek exegesis, church history, Presbyterian polity,

and Reformed theology,

staying up to the wee hours of the night to write paper after paper,

switching over from wearing contact lenses to glasses again

because of the constant strain on my eyes,

these words kept me strong and focused

because of the promise and hope they conveyed.

By renewing the mind,

it is possible, by the grace of God, to be transformed  
and to be aligned with God's good and perfect will.

By renewing the mind,

it is possible that Christ himself might reveal more fully  
the beauty and wholeness of his own life and spirit in us.

The second verb which Paul uses here,

the one which we translate as "be transformed"

is "metamorphosis" in the Greek.

It means to be changed by our inmost nature; changed from the inside out.

Interestingly, it is the same Greek verb used in all three synoptic gospel accounts

to describe the transfiguration, the transformation of Jesus,

as he stood praying on a remote mountaintop

in the presence of Peter, James and John...and God.

"There he was transfigured, metamorphosed, before them,

his clothes became dazzling white,

whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them,"

Mark's Gospel tells us. (Mark 9:2)

For Jesus, to be transfigured,

to be transformed by the divine presence was so powerful an experience,

that even the inanimate, material creation,

his clothing, was affected, becoming dazzling white.

Jesus' transfiguration shows what happens when the divine presence

is fully manifested in human existence;

when God's glory exudes from every pore.

Our own transformation, made possible by the renewing of our minds,

is no less than our own process of transfiguration

and participation in the glorified life,

and the transformation of the material world around us, as well.

It is change from the inside, out,

the gradual infusion of our total being with the glory of God;  
the metamorphosis of our inner essential, as Mr. Rogers would say,  
made possible through our participation in the redemptive life,  
death, resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
Son of the living God.

It is change from the inside, out, not determined by whether we win the lottery;  
not determined by whether we have a total make-over;  
not determined by whether we graduate from one of the Ivy's;  
not determined by whether we win eight gold medals in the Olympics;  
not determined by whether we win American Idol or America's Biggest Loser;  
not even determined  
by whether we elect John McCain or Barack Obama as president.

It is change grounded in the in-breaking God-glory of Jesus Christ,  
tapped into by the renewing of our minds,  
re-shaping us from the inside-out,  
into our unique, God-given image.

It is change from our old-self to our new self, Paul tells the believers at Colosse,  
"which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."  
(Col. 3:10)

It is the kind of transformation attested to by Dorothy Day,  
Co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement,  
who said that she often woke up discouraged and prayed herself into  
acceptance and fortitude;  
She said, I'd wake to a "half-dead condition, a groaning in every bone,  
a lifelessness...a sense of 'quiet terror', which hangs over us all...  
turn desperately to prayer...and I am saved."

(Dorothy Day. *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day*,  
edited by Robert Ellsberg, as reviewed in "Sojourners Magazine",  
August 2008, p. 45)

It is the kind of transformation that one of you told me about this week  
after a summer of staggering loss – job, family, home –  
that enables this person to experience an inexplicable play  
between exquisite pain and exquisite beauty simultaneously,  
signatures of God's merciful presence and holiness.

It is the kind of transformation that comes from regular encounters  
with the living God, the One who comes to us through  
prayer, through sacred listening, through study of Scripture,  
through the sacraments,  
like the baptism of Mahaliah Vis  
which we will participate in this morning,  
through music and through sacrificial acts of love,  
which honor all humanity great or small as beloved creatures of God.

The fox tells the little prince,

“One sees clearly only with the heart.

Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”

On this Promotion Sunday, as we dedicate our teachers for this year,  
and commission them to the important task of renewing our minds  
in order to help us all grow in our knowledge and understanding of God,  
my prayer is that each of us, and this faith community as a whole,  
will commit ourselves anew

to the nurture of our inner essential,  
to the things that shape us from within,  
to prayer, to sacred listening, to study, to worship, to music,  
to sacrificial giving, to love;  
to the things that bring about kingdom change  
in our lives and in the broken world around us,  
through our participation in the glorified life of Jesus Christ. Amen.