

Colonel Dan Thomas of our congregation served in both Iraq wars, and he did one tour of duty in Afghanistan. I am indebted to Dan for the story I am about to tell you. It speaks pungently about the context in which my sermon has to make its way today. It is a story of that mythical Southern character called Bubba.

Each Friday night after work, Bubba would fire up his outdoor grill and cook a venison steak. But all of Bubba's neighbors were Catholic, and since it was Lent, they had to eat fish on Friday.

The delicious aroma from the grilled venison steaks was causing such a problem for the Catholic faithful that they finally talked to their priest. The priest came to visit Bubba and suggested he become a Catholic.

After several classes and much study, Bubba attended Mass, and as the priest sprinkled holy water over him, he said, "You were born a Baptist and raised a Baptist, but now you are a Catholic."

Bubba's neighbors were greatly relieved, until Friday night arrived, and the wonderful aroma of grilled venison again filled the neighborhood. The priest was called immediately by the neighbors, and as he rushed into Bubba's yard, clutching a Rosary, preparing to scold him, he stopped and watched in amazement.

There stood Bubba, clutching a small bottle of holy water, which he carefully sprinkled over the grilling meat as he chanted, "You wuz born a deer, you wuz raised a deer, but now you is a catfish."

### Getting Serious

That is what my sermon is up against. The sermon series that started last Sunday is a summons from God through me to this entire congregation. The apostle expressed it this way in Romans 12:1: **Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual worship.**

As one who leads the way, I say to you, "Offer your body to God as a living sacrifice. Reaffirm the offer of your body to God as a living sacrifice. Don't be afraid of failure or hypocrisy. Be afraid only of being so mired in the mundane that you no longer lift up your eyes to the horizon and aspire to be what God calls you to be."

And down inside your distracted souls something says, "I'm not a catfish, never been a catfish, and nothing you say will make me a catfish. Don't try!" Too late! I'm already committed to try. And too important! We are the elect. We belong to the community of faith that began with Abraham and includes the Christian Church. God chose us to carry forward His purpose in the world, to extend His mercy to every nation on earth. Romans 12-15 tightens our grip on what God wants His elect to be. Offering our bodies to Him as living sacrifices is basic to what He wants us to be.

How can I not summon you to that high calling? I must honor God who called me to pastor His people, and I must prepare this church for the hard choices we will face between now and 2020. This fall could be a watershed moment in our life together at Brandywine Valley Baptist Church.

At the same time, your reluctance to heed God's summons is not necessarily a bad thing. Jesus told us to count the cost before we sign up for a hard task in the kingdom of God. He doesn't want us to honor Him with our lips, while our hearts are far from Him. I tried last week to remove some of the more obvious obstacles in your devotion to God.

The summons to offer your body to God as a living sacrifice is not just for mature Christians. It goes to all Christians, beginners and more experienced. The apostle wrote his letter to ordinary people, many of whom were illiterate. Deep devotion to God is possible, as long as you don't try to do everything at once. You will fail, as you fail at everything that is difficult and hard. Failure doesn't make you a hypocrite, as long as you never forget how weak you are and never use your successes to put other people down.

Of course, you will want to know what are you getting yourself into? The sermon series that started last Sunday is called "Apps for the Elect." Many specific applications will show you what are you getting yourself into. I will introduce you to them throughout October and November, as God summons you through me to **offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual worship.** It's time we took a first look at what you are getting yourselves into, if you are obedient to this heavenly summons.

### Saying No!

Verse 2: **Do not conform any longer 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.**

This is the basic pattern in the way a living sacrifice goes about life. The first part of the pattern is saying No! **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.** This is not the advice of an extremist. It means simply and powerfully, resist anything in this world that pushes you away from Christ and His Church. If drinking alcohol pushes you away, say, "Lord, I belong to you," and forsake it. If working for the Company pushes you away, say, "Lord, I belong to you," and look for another job. If your best friends push you away from Christ and His Church, say, "Lord, I belong to you," and find new friends. I'm not interested in a long list of negative possibilities. Look within yourself and identify where you are at risk and learn to resist it.

C. S. Lewis wrote a little classic called *The Screwtape Letters*. They are letters from a senior demon to a junior demon on how to tempt a human being. In Letter 12 Uncle Screwtape writes this advice to his nephew, the junior demon he was responsible for: "But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy (the 'Enemy' in Screwtape's world is God). It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

You need to know yourself. What threatens to push you away from Christ and His Church? When you know what it is, resist it. My challenge to you is this: let's be a congregation that resists every threat. Let's help each other to resist. Do you have a trusted friend or trusted circle of friends you can tell what threatens to push you away from Christ and His Church and whose advice you will take?

It may come as a shock to you to learn that some people will be happy if you fail as a Christian. They will be happy if this church fails. There are patterns of behavior in our world that people would deliberately use in the attempt to draw us away from Christ and destroy our faith. Christians living among the patterns of this world are like the herpetologist who milks venom from a cobra. We can do it, but the dangers are real and

can be deadly. The first thing for most of us is to get no closer to the cobra than we have to.

### Saying Yes!

**Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.** Resist anything in this world that pushes you away from Christ and His Church. And here's the first thing we can do to resist the pattern of this world. Don't dwell on the pattern of this world. We need to acknowledge it, because it poses a clear and present danger to our relationship with God.

But Christ has not called us to lament how bad the world is or how difficult and dangerous the world is. The apostle's next counsel to the Church in verse 2 aims us in the right direction. **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.**

**Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** Why would you not pursue that possibility? Why would you not want to go from being the caterpillar that you are to the butterfly God has in mind for you to be.

I am a terribly flawed man. But when I think of the changes I have undergone over the past 50 years because of the gospel of Christ, I can bear witness that the promise of transformation is not empty rhetoric. I can bear witness that the promise does not have an expiration date. And when I see the changes in me and remember my enduring faults, my heart beats faster as I remember the words of 1 John 3:2: **Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he (Christ) appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.**

The promise of transformation is not the exclusive privilege of the spiritual elite. It is the birthright of the smallest caterpillar on the leaf. It is God's promise to you. If we pursue this promise together, something beautiful and unprecedented will emerge among us, and we will bless the people in this gentle river valley we call home.

Verse 2 says the transformation takes place **by the renewing of your mind.** Now, words matter, and I think the word "renewing" is a weak translation. Think about how we use that word. You renew your driver's license. Nothing changes. The renewal continues what had been going on before. You renew your subscription to a magazine or newspaper or on-line service. Nothing changes. The renewal continues what had been going on before. That's not transformation. That's business as usual.

C. S. Lewis to the rescue again. He gives a memorable picture of transformation in *Mere Christianity*. "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild the house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of . . . You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself" (*Mere Christianity*, 173).

That's not "the *renewing* of your mind." It's "the renovation of your mind." "Fundamental attitudes must be changed and new perspectives taken up" (James Dunn, *38B Word Biblical Commentary, Romans 9-16*, 714). The first step in renovation is saying No! to anything that threatens to turn you away from Christ and His Church and saying Yes! to

the renovation of your minds. Stay with me over the next six weeks, and I can show you from Romans 12-15 a lot that we say yes to.

### **The Prize**

The renovation of our minds leads to something deep and wonderful. The end of verse two tells us what it is. **Then** – as you are transformed by the renovation of your minds – **then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.** The purpose of Romans 12-15 is for us to know the will of God right down in the jungle of this present, evil world. The apostle said that it is possible for God’s elect to test it and approve it. Knowing the will of God means knowing God. Knowing God means participating in the life of God.

Is that not a prize worth pursuing? Does that prize not justify the risks you take in offering your bodies to God as living sacrifices? Does it not justify saying No! to anything that threatens to turn you away from Christ and His Church and saying Yes! to the renovation of your minds?

The secret of such devotion is the love in your heart for Christ. The love in your heart for Christ takes us back to the heart of the gospel. Verse 1: **I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy.** The letter to the Romans tells the story of God’s mercy to man.

**God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** – Romans 5:8. **When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.** – Romans 5:10. **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** – Romans 8:32. That is the gospel, and the gospel is God’s way of extending mercy to ever-widening circles of humanity.

If you have any sense that this mercy of God is meant for you; if you have any hunger to say thank you to Him in some deep way; if any gratitude, any desire to please Him, then **offer your bodies to God as living sacrifices.**

This journey together requires a decision that only you can make. You can express the decision by saying, “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.” You can say with the Apostle Paul: **It is my eager expectation and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage, so that now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.** – Philippians 1:20. For all who are ready to make or to reaffirm that decision, we will wait now in silent prayer for you to **offer your bodies to God as living sacrifices.**