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*Me and My Symbols*  
Romans 12:1-2

We humans are symbol makers. We have the unique ability to capture the essence of a moment or an event with a word or a picture and use that symbol to recreate the experience for ourselves and for others at a later date.

Look at the symbols in our sanctuary: lighted candles, Celtic cross on the Communion Table, water being poured into the baptismal font during the processional hymn, pulpit Bible, stained glass windows....

For the past two weeks, we've grown accustomed to the symbols of the Summer Olympics' fanfare, the five connected-ring logo, gold, silver, and bronze metals, the American Flag, ours and others' national anthems.

The orders of worship in many churches provide rituals that give meaning and anticipation—Doxologies, Affirmations of Faith, Choral Responses, Benedictions. Even when our symbols and rituals become rigid they still provide something solid—something stable in the passage of time.

On my first Sunday in Hilton's pulpit, I told about a ritual snafu from the town of my first church out of seminary in the low country of South Carolina.. Several months after arriving in Blackville, SC, the high school football season began. During the prior year, Blackville High had won the state championship.

Being eager for the new pastor in town to be introduced to the public, Clarence Richie, the volunteer announcer for the games and a member of my new congregation, asked me to offer the invocation at the opening game. (Invocations at the beginning of public sports events used to be standard part of the process, as many of you know.)

Thirty minutes prior to the kick-off, up in the announcer's booth towering above the field Clarence explained the pattern. "About five minutes prior to the kick-off, I am going to introduce each team and call the names of the starting players for each team. Then, I will ask everyone to stand for the band to play the national anthem. After that, I

will introduce you and you will offer the prayer. Then, the teams and cheerleaders will come running back on the field.

Now think it about the order of that ritual for just a moment. It is exactly opposite of the way it normally took place. Customarily, the invocation was first. The singing of the national anthem followed. Then, the teams came back on the field for the coin toss. However, that evening when the band came within the last measure of the national anthem, I stepped forward with mic and prayer in hand. But as soon as brass, percussion woodwinds and the last straggling voice on the other side of the field finished "...home of the brave," about a hundred football players and cheerleaders came bursting out onto the field as everyone yelled and sat down. I never got to "Heavenly Father..." which was all right with me, but Clarence was most embarrassed and scrambled forward taking the mic in his hand ordering everyone to stand back up and be quiet so that we could have the invocation. It seemed to take forever. Finally, things got quiet again and I stepped forward for the invocation. Down in front of me were two football teams, coaches, cheerleaders for both sides, and about three thousand parents and fans glaring up with looks that seemed to say, "This had better be one heck of a an invocation!"

I want you to clear your mind of every thought. Picture for a moment the person in this world that you respect the most. Imagine yourself with that person. There is an air of urgency. She or he has asked for the privilege of making one request. You know it is a serious matter. Your eyes level. He begins to speak, "I appeal to you..." This is precisely what the Apostle Paul does on behalf of God. He says, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God..."

The Apostle Paul makes his appeal in a straightforward, three-fold way.

***I appeal to you to present yourselves as a living sacrifice.***

Travel to the great religious centers of the world, and you will see ancient sacrifices made to the gods. In those ancient days, the more religious a person became, the more he or she was inclined to give up something of value to earn the god's favor.

Our understanding of God through the person of Jesus is that there is nothing you can give up, nor price you can pay to win God's favor. God's love is a gift, freely given

to you. “I love you now; I always have; and, I always will” is a way God might say such to us. In response to this gift of love we are privileged to offer a sacrifice to God.

In Old Testament times, animals were brought to the temple. These were blood offerings. Tithes—the first fruits of agricultural products—were brought and presented as sacrificial offerings to God.

As the Old Testament prophet, Micah, proclaimed (Micah 6:6-8), God wants us to grow beyond our monetary sacrifices and offerings. God wants us to combine our physical gifts with the daily gift of our lives. The mature follower of God understands that our bodies—our minds, our imagination, our energy, our influence, our lives—are the temple of God. God is to live within us. We are to present our lives as a living sacrifice.

One of my symbols of sacrifice is a necktie. A friend, Brent Walker, gave it to me. He was on the PNC of one of my former churches. A young, prominent lawyer with the Carlton, Fields firm in Tampa, Brent stuck his head in my office early one Sunday morning and said, “I’ve left you something on the desk out here.” Later, I discovered a handsome navy and brown tie in a New York Brooks Brother bag. After the service, I saw Nancy, his wife, and asked her to please thank Brent for me. She said, “Did he tell you the story of why he is giving it to you?”

“No.”

“Well, in between conferences he spent about two hours looking for just the right tie, which he bought for himself. On his flight home, he was plagued with feelings of selfishness that would cause him to spend two hours picking out one tie...for himself. So, he decided he needed to sacrifice it and give it away.” With a smile of her face she said, “That’s how you got it.” Brent’s struggle with the appropriate “spending” of his time, money, and energy was a prelude to his offering his life in ordained ministry a couple of years later. Now with a law degree and a theology degree he serves as Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, D.C., protecting the separation of church and state and focusing on pertinent matters of religion and politics.

Paul said, “This is your spiritual worship” or “reasonable service.” Another way of saying it is to say that it simply makes sense to present your whole self to God. Worship is not a Sunday morning hour affair or ritual. This hour is *one* expression of

worship. True spiritual worship is the offering of your every day life to God. It involves *all* of your life. This defies the tendency we have to speak of God only in terms of our membership in a church or our baptism in a church. The Apostle Paul looks us in the eye and appeals to us to present our whole self in reasonable service, in spiritual worship 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. How do we respond?

***I appeal to you to not be conformed to this world...***

Phillips' translation expresses it: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold..." This is an appeal to negative activity. It tells us what not to do. Do not let the world shape you the way it wants to shape you. Do not let the world decide what you are going to be like. Earl Palmer in his commentary on Romans entitled *Salvation by Surprise* says: "The Christian does not receive the definition of who he/she is or an evaluation of what he/she is worth from the created order, but from the Creator."

When Paul talks about being "conformed to this world" he is talking about the outward form. The outward form of something varies from day to day. If you are 40 years old, you don't look the same as you did when you were 16. That does not mean you are a different person; it means only that the outward form has varied.

Noting the change that comes over a person in the course of on 24-hour period is interesting. Early in the morning, you may have an unshaven face (if you are male), unbrushed teeth, and unbrushed hair. An hour later you're good to go. Later in the afternoon you may take dress clothes off and put on some sloppy shorts and a T-shirt to work in the yard... Later in the evening, you shower and head out to the Ferguson Center for a concert.

We must guard against the things of this world that would like to tell us what to believe...how to act...what our attitude should be...define for us what success is...what power is...what popularity is...what pleasure is.... I'm amazed and disappointed at how quick the media is to tell us how we should interpret debates, events, and comments, rather than faithfully reporting the facts and details. Paul looks deep into our eyes, appealing to us to not conform to the values of this world.

***I appeal to you to be transformed by the renewal of your mind...***

The negative is “be not conformed.” The positive is to be transformed. This means undergoing a change. And, it relates primarily to our inward personality and values. Paul is saying that if you are going to worship and serve God, a radical change of the inner person is needed. As a result of one’s new life in Christ, you are in a constant state of renewal. Instead of being called to self-centeredness, a person is called to Christ-centeredness. Change is possible—deep, inner, yielding change—with all of its implications in terms of growing toward wholeness—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

What does it mean to be transformed? Remember, these words are addressed to Christians—persons who have already come to know the Spirit of Jesus. To be transformed in this sense means to let the Spirit of the living Christ live within us. We can all play the religious games...look like we’ve got it all together on the outside, but still be selfish, immature, and deceptive on the inside.

The results are that you, by your very life, begin to live in harmony with the very Spirit of God. You find out by practical experience who God is and what is the will of God for your life. More and more you begin to experience what is good, what is acceptable, and what is perfect.

I know that most of us in this place of worship today have been baptized and, hopefully, have had a long relationship with God. But I know that there is always the possibility that in any service of worship some people are looking for a reason to believe and waiting on the right moment. I urge you to let the moment be now. In your own mind, offer your life—all of it—to God.

More specifically, I am called to appeal to all of you, Christ’s church. I appeal to you not to let the world squeeze you into its own mold. I appeal to you to be transformed by the renewal of your minds.

A number of years ago, Richard Halverson told of a Lutheran pastor who was most discouraged in his ministry. Things were not going right. He was out of touch with God. He loved Christ, but he had allowed a congregation to squeeze him into its own mold. He resigned and traveled across the country to another part of the United States. Traveling through Union Station in Chicago, he met a professor with the Moody Bible

Institute. The men exchanged a few words. He shared his discouragement with the professor. The professor drew his attention to this powerful text from Romans, chapter 12. Then, the professor left him standing all-alone in that great railroad station. The pastor, who was most familiar with the doctrine of Romans 1 through 16, contemplated the appeal of verses 1 and 2 in chapter 12. And, there with his toe, he made the sign of the cross on the train station floor and stepped forward presenting himself as a living sacrifice to God. It was the beginning of a brand new era of spiritual fruitfulness in his ministry.

I invite you, in this moment, to make the sign of the cross in your mind. Stand on it in the acknowledgement that you do not want to be just part way God's, but that you are willing to give your whole self, which is truly *your spiritual worship*.

## **Prayer**

### **Romans 12:1-8**

1I 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. 2Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

### **Exodus 1:8-2:10**

8Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." 11Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

15The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16"When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." 17But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 19The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." 20So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. 22Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

1Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

5The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 7Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

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### **Micah 6:6-8**

6 "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" 8He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

- Eastminster Presbyterian Church, Marietta, GA, August 24, 2003
- First Presbyterian Church, Dalton, GA, October 10, 2004