

The Enemy In Me¹
Romans 12:1-2
Morningstar First Baptist Church
March 3, 2019

Pastor Roberts told me
that your theme or emphasis for this month of March
is self-reflection and humility.
Self-reflection and humility.

That is no doubt the result
of spiritual insight and careful planning
by Pastor Roberts and your spiritual leaders
because just three days from today
the worldwide church of Christ
enters the season of Lent
by observing a day known as Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday – when ashes
(which in the Bible are a sign of mortality and penitence)
are traced in the shape of a cross
on the forehead of the worshiper.

So Lent is a time for self-reflection and humility...
and I can assure you that these are parts of the Christian life
that are close to the hearts
of your Presbyterian sisters and brothers.

In fact, our forbearer in the faith –
a man you may have heard of, John Calvin –
permanently linked self-reflection and humility for us.

He said that whenever we come into God’s house for worship...
whenever we approach our holy God...
we are like the prophet Isaiah in the temple
who was overwhelmed by the majesty and glory of God...
because what happens when we are overwhelmed
by the majesty and glory of God,
we immediately reflect on ourselves...
(we “self-reflect”)

and when we reflect on ourselves
in the light of God’s holiness and majesty
we immediately become aware
of just how small and un-holy and un-majestic
we really are.

And that realization leads just one place – humility.

So this morning I want to invite you to join me...
and I do mean that...

¹ This sermon adapts but follows closely a sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III to the Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, IL., January 27, 2013.

I am hopefully not a preacher
who preaches AT you or God forbid, DOWN to you...
this is me asking you to join me in reflecting together
on the theme of the enemy in me...
the enemy in me.
Because the truth is that we all struggle INSIDE ourselves
with all kinds of things... we all have issues, don't we?
Don't let anybody tell you they don't have issues...
because if they tell you that
it just means they have not yet met the holy God.
No, I have issues and you have issues
and all God's children have issues...
and we all struggle against the enemy inside us.

Reading of Scripture

I beseech you, therefore, brethren...

I heard a seminary professor once say that whenever in the Bible you come across the word
"Therefore" you best pay careful attention to what it's THERE FOR.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God,
that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice,
holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.
2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that
ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Sermon

I'm a huge fan of Denzel Washington.
Anyone else like Denzel?
Several years ago, he starred in a film called "Flight" –
and in this film Denzel was able to do something
that few actors are skilled enough to do.
He was able to play both the "protagonist"
and the "antagonist."
Now I'm no expert,
but for those who may not be familiar with these terms
the "protagonist" is the main character in the film –
"pro" meaning "for" – it's the character the story is for.
The "antagonist"
is the one who is "against" the main character.
This is what makes stories and films interesting –
it's the struggle between the protagonist and the antagonist.
But what is so fascinating about the character Denzel plays
is that he plays BOTH –

the protagonist and the antagonist - simultaneously.
Washington plays Captain Whip Whitaker...
 an undeniably gifted airline pilot
 who is also a drunk, a drug abuser, and a womanizer.
Early in the film we see
 that after a night of heavy drinking and almost no sleep,
 Captain Whitaker snorts cocaine to help him wake up
 so he could fly that morning.
On the way from Orlando to Atlanta
 he has a drink in the cockpit.
But then the plane encounters severe turbulence
 and goes into a steep dive,
 yet somehow Denzel performs what everyone agrees
 is an unbelievable aerial maneuver
 that ends up saving the lives
 of most of his crew and passengers.
He is hailed as a hero... which he is.
But then it comes out how seriously impaired he was that day...
 the National Transportation and Safety Board opens an inquiry...
 and Capt. Whitaker's life continues to unravel from there.

Throughout much of the rest of the film we witness this unraveling –
 excessive drinking... drug abuse...
 his already broken relationship
 with his ex-wife and 15-year-old son gets even worse.

His entire existence is built upon lies
 he tells to others and to himself.
There's no villain or group that tries to destroy Denzel...
 Denzel does that himself.

He is the PROTAGONIST and the ANTAGONIST...
 the hero and the villain... all rolled into one.
 One man plays both the hero and the villain.

Well, if you've seen the film
 you know that you spend the entire movie
 rooting for Denzel's heroic side –
 you want so bad for it to emerge triumphant...
 you hope and pray that somehow
 he will conquer his demons...
 defeat the enemy within...
 and be transformed by the renewing of his mind.

It takes a skillful actor
 to play the protagonist and the antagonist simultaneously...
 and Denzel Washington sure pulls it off.

But the truth is you and I see this every single day –
 in the church and in our personal lives
 we see people – Christians –

who are the protagonist and the antagonist...
simultaneously.

Let's look at the church first.

Historically, in 139 BCE the Roman Emperor Claudius
issued an edict expelling all Jews from Rome.

Accusing the Jews of aggressive missionary efforts,
Claudius just kicked them out of the imperial city.

Fast forward almost 200 years... during which Jesus had come...
and the Emperor Nero reversed that order
making it possible for Jews to return to Rome.

And among those who DID return were Christians –
some were Jewish Christians
and some were Gentile Christians...
but ALL of them loved Christ.

Obviously, this was seen as a GOOD thing –
Christians returning to Rome was a good thing –
but before long a conflict arose in the church
between these Jewish and Gentile Christians...
DISSENSION began to take root in the community...

and what I want you to know about this
is they did it to themselves.

There was no external Roman pressure on the church
that created this tension...
the conflict was completely INTERNAL...
this was an “in-house” dispute
among PEOPLE who were passionate about their faith
and had good intentions,
but who turned out to be their own worst enemy.

I wonder - do you know anything about this, my friends?
Has this ever happened in this church...
or maybe in another church you were a member of?

This happened not too very long ago
in the church I now pastor and love...
there was internal conflict...
there were good and faithful people
thinking their cause was right
and their intentions were good...
yet, who caused deep division
in the church of Jesus Christ called First Presbyterian...

and I assume that somewhere along the way
that may have happened here at Morning Star as well.

THIS is what Paul is talking about
when he speaks of the “renewing of your MIND” -
the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians
are not being acted on by EXTERNAL FORCES,

but are beset by INTERNAL issues ...
the greatest enemy of the church
is not attacking them from the outside,
but that enemy is right there within their fellowship.
And what Paul is saying is that what the church needs...
and what you and I need as followers of Jesus...
we need a renewing, not of our brain...
but a renewing of our mind.

Now, our spotlight this morning shines out
from this well-known passage at the beginning of chapter 12
in which Paul speaks of the “renewing of your MIND.”

Now, what’s interesting
is that the Greek word translated “mind”
can refer to the renewing of your insight...
renewing of your understanding...
renewing of your thinking.

But it can NEVER be translated
by the word we use today - “brain.”

You can say “mind,”
but it cannot mean “brain” –
my brain is not my mind... your brain is not your mind.

In fact, the African and Biblical understanding of this
is that the mind and spirit are connected...
and the entity that we know as the brain
is not the same as the mind.

The brain is simply a mass of human tissue weighing about 3 lbs.
It is a biological entity made up of cells and chemicals
that controls the voluntary and involuntary activities
of the body.

My BRAIN has a function,
but from an African and Biblical perspective
brain and mind are not the same thing
and if my BRAIN is devoid of my MIND
then we’ve got big trouble...
because acts of compassion and love and faithfulness
are just nowhere to be found.

The “mind” is separate from the brain –
one can have a functioning brain,
but the mind may not be right.

Let me say it like this.
The greatest opponent of Bill Clinton
was not Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr,
but Bill Clinton...
the greatest opponent of Jim Bakker
was not the Devil,

but Jim Bakker...
the greatest opponent Tiger Woods faced
was not Phil Mickelson, but Tiger Woods...
the greatest opponent of Lance Armstrong's life
was not any other rider in the Tour de France, but who?
Lance Armstrong.

My friends, the temptations and pressures of this world
are real and they are powerful...
and I don't mean to deny that.

But perhaps the most formidable enemy
you and I have will ever face
is the one we live with every day...
the one who stares back at us in the morning
when we look in the mirror...
because the enemy who will bring you down and cause you to fall
is not always some-thing or some-one outside of you,
but the one you look at in the mirror.

And what Paul is saying is that if our mind is not right...
if that mind/spirit connection in our lives
is not renewed by Christ...
then we are sitting ducks...
easy prey for the patterns of thinking and behavior
that are dictated by our brain.

We are, like Denzel, the heroes and villains in our own drama...
we are the protagonist and the antagonist
in the story of our life...
and at those times we tripped up
it is not always because someone else tripped us...
those times we have fallen
were not always the result of being pushed.

At least **SOMETIMES**
it's because we forgot who we are in Christ
and put ourselves in places we shouldn't be...
SOMETIMES it's because we forgot
who it is that loved us so much he endured death,
even death on a cross...
and forgetting that, we walked through a door
we shouldn't have walked through.

Truth be told, the enemy is in me... and in you...
and knowing this the Apostle Paul commands each of us:
Do not be conformed to this world!

Don't adapt yourself to the values and priorities of this age.
No! Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

The very real challenge of this
is that each day we enter our present **STILL** bound by our past...

each day we are influenced by our upbringing...
each day we are defined by our own actions
and the actions others bring upon us...
each day we are caught in a cycle
in which the past always presses upon us
in the present...
and often we are SO caught by the past
that we cannot make choices about today.

It's a challenge – I'm not going to say it isn't.

And neither is the Apostle Paul!

Do you remember how he wrote about

his own struggle with the enemy within:

“I do not understand my own actions.

For I do not do what I want,

but do the very thing I hate...

I do not do the good I want,

but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

Paul knew about that challenge...

he knew just where we find ourselves today.

But he also knew there is good news

and it's this good news I want to share with you today, my friends. The good news is this

–

that although there may be strong external forces

pressing against you –

they do not have to define who you are...

they do not have to limit who you will become.

Why?

Because of what Christ has done FOR you.

Why?

Because of what Christ has done IN you.

Paul says, “You are no longer in the flesh; you are in the Spirit

you have DIED to sin and are ALIVE in Christ Jesus.

THEREFORE... (and there's that “therefore”)...

Paul commands,

BE WHO YOU ARE... do not be conformed to this world... BE WHO YOU

ARE and do not be a slave to sin...

BE WHO YOU ARE the past is over and gone...

BE WHO YOU ARE a new creation altogether.

Well, there's just one more thing we need deal with –

it's the question of HOW.

How do I live as the new creation I already am?

How do I defeat the enemy (that antagonist)

that is in me so I can live a transformed life?

Well, if you got to know me

you would learn that I almost always
make things more complicated than they really are.
I may be simple-minded,
but I rarely think things are simple.
Yet, this morning...
as we spotlight these words of Paul in Romans 12...
it does seem relatively simple –
notice I didn't say EASY, I said SIMPLE.
How do I overcome the enemy within me?
Paul says, "Make a choice!" Make a choice.
Be transformed by the renewing of your mind –
Paul believes that YOU AND I CAN CHOOSE –
because we have power to choose.
If there are things pressing against us,
we have power to choose my destiny –
Regardless of whatever you may have done in your past,
you have power to choose what you'll do in the future...
whatever happened to me yesterday, I can choose today.
I can choose to wake up each morning and give God the glory.
I can choose each morning to live according to a renewed mind.
It's NOT EASY, but it is simple.
Make a choice, Paul says,
to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Ahhh... but you don't understand, preacher... my life.
You don't know anything about what I'm facing...
the things that press in on me...
I got too many issues... you don't understand my life.
And you're right... I don't understand.
But God does!
Neither do you know the things that press in on me...
I got issues, too... you don't know my life.
But God does!
And GOD is still GOD.
What I know and what YOU know
is that God is still God.
And if God is still God,
we may not know what'll happen tomorrow,
but we do know who'll be there with us.
May not know what the future holds,
but we do know who holds the future.
Circumstances and life and our issues will still press upon us...
but they no longer have the same power over us.
And knowing that...
trusting that God is still God, I can CHOOSE...
you can CHOOSE...

not be conformed to this OLD world...

but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind...
and to live in God's NEW world.

Make a choice! Paul says...

Every day you have the power to choose to have a renewed mind. So, turn to your neighbor and say, "I choose today."

Turn to one more neighbor and say, "I choose today."

There comes a point in the movie "Flight"
where Denzel finally chooses.

He chooses to quit the drinking and drugs, yes...

but even more important,

he chooses to stop lying to the folks who care about him...

he chooses to stop lying to himself.

He made a choice...

and that choice led to a whole process

by which he was transformed by the renewing of his mind.

In the next to the last scene Denzel is in prison...

he was impaired that day and people died

and he deserved to be in prison for that.

He is talking to a bunch of other inmates

about his life and struggles...

about his recovery and how good it was to stop all the lying...

about the renewing of his mind

that had taken place over the past 13 months...

and finally, he says something like:

"I know this may sound strange

coming from a man who is in prison,

but I have never been so free."

Friends, you and I have the power to choose today...

to be transformed...

by the renewing of our mind...

so that we might prove

what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.