

*A Simple Vision*

Romans 12:1-8

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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In the opinion of many, the most famous photographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a shy Frenchman named Henri Cartier-Bresson. He coined the phrase “the decisive moment”—the instant in which all the elements of a picture come together in a way that expresses the essence of the event and something extraordinary in ordinary life. Perhaps *the* signature image of Cartier-Bresson’s work is that of a man jumping, the instant before his heel enters the rainwater that lies like a mirror on the ground. The water reflects the silhouette of the leaping man, and at first you think, Wow. He caught the guy the split second before everything was erased. He froze for all time what was there for only an instant: a perfect mirror image of the man.

But then, if you spend a little more time on the photo, you notice that the man is also mirrored by the figure of a leaping circus performer on a poster on the building behind him. And then you might also notice a number of other mirror images caught in the same frame. And you might come away thinking, as have countless people, “I never thought there could be so much to see in such an ordinary picture.”

Cartier-Bresson was the undisputed master of drawing the extraordinary out of the ordinary. You might say that he had a very *discerning* eye and a gift of vision—a vision and a passion for life and for ordinary people.

Saint Paul never knew a camera or photography. But he too had a passion and a gift of seeing. Paul’s passion was the church, and in Romans 12, I believe that he gives us a “decisive moment” kind of snapshot of what that church looks like. It is a simple vision. Yet it is timeless and profound because it captures what life looks like when the Kingdom of God invades the world.

*I 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.*

We must remember that Paul does not make this astonishing appeal simply out of the blue. He doesn’t begin his lengthy letter to the Romans with this appeal, though it does cut to the heart of his practical reason for writing. Paul’s appeal for the Roman Christians to form the church is based on his most complete exposition of the good news in all of his letters. We are able to present ourselves in living sacrifice only because Jesus has already been sacrificed for

us. We can joyfully give ourselves collectively to God only because God has already given us his Son and poured out his Spirit.

Romans 12 is about living out our new life in Christ. There *is* such a thing as a Christian life in this world. Salvation doesn't simply mean a ticket to heaven. It means a new way of life here and now. It means responding to God's love in Christ by choosing to be part of the new people of God, who are being drawn together and formed by the Spirit.

It may sound strange, but Saint Paul would probably have agreed with Woody Allen's one-liner, "95 percent of success is showing up."

But then what? What do we do when we get here? What is it that the church needs to be attending to first of all? There are many prescriptions today in the church growth literature that fills in this blank, but surprisingly few of them lead us to where Romans 12 brings us. For example, there's the megachurch, the seeker-sensitive church, the purpose-driven church, the cell church, and now even the emerging church and the missional church. How many of them seriously consider what Paul says in verse 2?

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...*

No doubt Paul had in mind the first 11 chapters of his letter as a good beginning point! We've just spent a couple of Sundays considering how important the discipline of study is in the Christian life. But notice what Paul says is the *purpose* of our minds being transformed.

Transformation is a popular word today. But most of it has to do with *personal transformation*. Do this, buy this, try this and be *transformed*—physically, financially, intellectually, in self-confidence or in your ability to influence people. But Paul's call for our transformation is not aimed at *us* so much as it is intended to aim us toward *God*. The purpose of our transformation is *so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect*.

In other words, be renewed so that you can see what God wants and is up to, not least of which in the church itself. And then Paul gives us a *picture*. Maybe a decisive moment kind of picture. A picture that we've thought about, sung about, prayed over, wrestled with and maybe even lived with for a long time. The picture is of the body of Christ. The church as a body made up of many members with many gifts that differ. A simple vision for what all the fuss is about and what everything is supposed to look like.

What is the church? A body made up of many members. The Body of Christ in the world. The gift that Paul gives us here, you might say in modern photographic terms, is a “wide-angle” view of the church—a wholistic view.

And this gets me to wondering, what would a picture of *our* church look like if we could take it like Paul’s? Two weeks ago at our Church Life Retreat, we came up with the lists that you have on the blue handouts. Pull that out and take a look at it. At the time, I didn’t think of it as a snapshot of the church, but it seems to fit, so humor me.

On the left you have the list called “Action and Energy.” Here is a list of most of the things we do in our church that have attracted a lot of positive energy and action. These are the vital ministries of the church “where the rubber meets the road,” so to speak.

On the right hand side, there is a list of Key Ministry Boards. These are the boards under our new church design, adopted little more than a year ago. One of the things I shared at the retreat I’ve written down as Observation #1 beneath the box. “While we are busy doing the things that fall in the left hand column...three of the four key Ministry Boards (Worship, Community Formation and Stewardship) have not formed. Does this mean that our Design was flawed, or that we are in danger of losing our Vision? (The Key Ministry Boards were identified as those practices we need to cultivate if our Vision is to come to life.)”

I’ve been having an e-mail discussion with our moderator about this chart over the last few days, and Susan has been really helpful in pushing me to sharpen my explanation of what I see in this snapshot. It is *not* that the left hand list is “bad” and the right hand list is “good.” No; there is a lot in the left hand column that you can find in Romans 12.

With Susan’s helpful prodding, what I’ve realized (that I didn’t see two weeks ago at the Retreat), is that the right-hand Key Ministries of Worship, Community Formation, Stewardship and Christian Witness were identified by our Design process as crucial *to forming people who are willing and able to present themselves as a living sacrifice.*

One of the main reasons why we engaged in the New Creation process was the realization that the church tends to run like a restaurant: some do the work (we call it ministry); the rest come and take part. But the Romans 12 Vision of the church as the body of Christ describes *every* member having a part. Not some parts do, other parts receive. So in the New Creation process, we wrestled with this gap. How do we become a church with less restaurant dynamics, and more Romans 12/body vitality? And the answer we arrived at was, *we need to cultivate extraordinary Christians. Extraordinary, ordinary Christians.*

How do we do that? Not just by doing what we've always done. But by shifting from just running programs for all sorts of people to becoming a congregation that practices Christian practices (Richard Foster calls them the Disciplines) that put us in a place where God can transform us.

To put it another way, it's not a question of left hand list *or* right hand list. It's a both-and situation. What I'm concerned about, however, is that by still being mostly settled in the left-hand list, we are not going to be able to start up the kinds of ministries and practices that we hope (in the long run) will cultivate the members that no one even now seems to have enough of.

The Foster video this morning is/was about Simplicity. At the very end of it, almost in a throw-away line, Dallas Willard says something like, "Church as usual is not adequate for spiritual growth." Church as usual doesn't grow mature Christians.

We often wish we could find more people in the church to get involved, and often we are looking for pretty gifted people. The insight of our New Creation Design was, what are we going to do to intentionally cultivate these kinds of extraordinary ordinary people?

I think it would be really interesting to reflect on this snapshot for a bit. It may not be the best picture of our church; certainly there are many others we might consider. But I think there's something here that would be worth our pondering.

(Now put that aside for a moment. I'm going to throw out a couple more things, and then it'll all end up in the same place.)

At the Retreat earlier this month, Wayne Tadaki presented some information about what's going on with the Preschool Board. Wayne has chaired the Preschool Board for 10 years, and he has done an outstanding job. He plans to step down as chair this spring. From what I understand, Wayne has been trying for a couple of years to find someone to take his place as chair, but no one has stepped forward. At our Retreat, Wayne shared the gist of a discussion that the Preschool Board had recently, in light of his plans to step down. Listen to some of the questions that the board listed. I think this is another example of a "decisive moment" picture in words.

*Has the administration of the Preschool become too complex, too sophisticated, too "professional" for the current Board to oversee?*

*Would the Preschool be better served by being administered by a preschool chain like KCAA or Kamaaina Kids?*

*Do we need a facility manager to specifically take care of the Preschool portion of the church?*

*Are we truly fulfilling the mission of the Preschool, and is it what the members of the church want?*

*Does the church have the leadership, vision and commitment to continue this ministry?*

Wayne shared with us that the Preschool Board felt *that the preschool in some ways is coming to a crossroad in its faith journey, and it is time to more purposefully ask God and the larger church membership to give us guidance in which direction he and they want this ministry to go.*

The questions raised by the Preschool Board account for the last list in the Snapshot box. *Changes*. Changes in Society, Family and Congregation. Our New Creation Process gave us a headstart in dealing with change. But the nature of the challenge is that you have to keep skating to where the puck is going to be.

Finally, this morning you also have in hand the report of our Denominational Study Team concerning our church's response to the General Synod resolution advocating same-sex marriage rights. As you may have read in the Tower article, the Witness Board last week adopted the report's recommendations. This report signals another "Decisive Moment" in the life of this congregation. For decades, Makiki has been one of the Hawaii Conference's Top Ten church contributors to OCWM, Our Church's Wider Mission, the fund that supports both Conference and national UCC ministries. That has now ended, at least for a time.

The Witness Board has committed itself to find other, specific ways to support Association, Conference, or denominational ministries that do not advance the gay marriage agenda that we perceive our national leadership has chosen.

Take a look at the report. Note that the report makes no claim to have "resolved" the issue. In fact, we are pretty sure this issue isn't going to go away. But we also believe that it isn't our job to "resolve" the controversy. Our job is to be the church. The body of Christ.

And what that means, we believe, is that we come together as needs arise to be the living sacrifice, the gathered community of faith, to work together to have our minds renewed so we may discern the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. The best thing that we did in the New Creation process was get together regularly to talk about things that hadn't been addressed before. This needs to continue.

We need to gather to discuss the Study Team's Report. We need to gather to hear from our Preschool Board and offer them the guidance they seek.

We need to gather to reflect on our church as a whole. What *is* going on here? What's the Spirit up to in our midst? What's God's will for us?

If you are drawn to hear and discuss any of these issues—the study report, the Preschool or the church snapshot—set aside Saturday, March 11 for another opportunity for us to come together. Not just to study Romans 12, but to live out Romans 12. God will surely be waiting.