

Horizon 2035 – Learn – Romans 12:1-12

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I was sifting through some of the founding documents of the church dating back forty years as we prepare to praise God next Sunday for the church on its 40th birthday. One tenet of its mission that was uniquely expressed in its mission statement in 1985 is this: “It is our mission to seek corporate and individual instruction in the word of God through the Bible, faith, and prayer so that God’s universal love and forgiveness may grow in us.”

Looking at the language of this, it’s interesting in two ways: First, it’s significant that seeking instruction in the Word of God was explicitly mentioned in the mission statement. And second, that the church would seek would instruction in the Word of God *so that* both God’s love and forgiveness would grow among the members.

In the mid-1980s when that document was written, there were no fewer cultural forces at work for people’s attention and devotion than there are today.

1985 saw those famous Live Aid concerts for famine relief around the world, along with hit song “We are the World.” World hunger was rampant, if not more rampant, than it is today.

1985 was the year that Playboy and Penthouse magazines published nude photos of the pop star Madonna, causing a cultural stir. Obviously, sexually explicit material had its place in the culture then as much as it does now.

1985 saw the launch of the Nintendo video gaming system. We lament the force and distraction of video games in such

advanced formats today, and they were really coming onto the scene forty years ago and threatening the attention of young minds everywhere.

So among those distractions, or temptations, or lures of the culture back then, the members of the newly formed Farragut Presbyterian Church committed themselves to learning— instruction through the Word of God so that the love and forgiveness of God might be more greatly experienced among them and shared with the world as a counter to the challenging influences and realities of the day.

Not much has changed since then. We face the same or greater temptations and threats as a civilization or culture.

As Frank Crouch, Retired Professor of New Testament at Moravian Theology Seminary observes, “[Today’s culture] inundates us with advertising designed to keep us conformed to this world. The marketing/media industry spends billions of dollars annually to flood televisions, websites, billboards, email, regular mail. They intrude even onto gas pump screens or the screens on debit/credit card readers. They seek to define us essentially as consumers, individual economic units existing for the sake of larger market shares. In addition, each day our families, friends, organizations, religions, political parties, and society at large pressure us to fit in, to stay within the boundaries of tradition, custom, or practice that mark who we’re “supposed” to be.” (Frank Crouch, *Working Preacher*, 2013)

The apostle Paul urges his readers in Romans 12, in response to the mercy of God, to not conform to the pattern of the world but be transformed by the renewing of their minds.

And, as Frank Crouch observes, “Not being conformed to this world is a tall order. The world will fight at every stage to

convince us to look the other way rather than glimpse the injustice, hatred, oppression, immorality, greed, and violence that surround us. It takes transformation, renewal of the mind, to detach ourselves from the world's attempts to occupy us with things that do not matter. Paul implores us to shake off the effects of this world, attend to the things that do matter, and "discern ... the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect" (Romans 12:2)."

Throughout the last four decades, Farragut Church has claimed instruction in the Word and learning in general as hallmarks of our identity and as ways of transforming our own minds. Scientists, engineers, and professors have dotted the membership throughout, helping to forge an ethos of inquiry that is woven throughout our DNA.

FPC values learning. The church values the process of not only reading the Bible and taking its lessons with it into the world, but it values the *process* of learning. Faith formation happens when the people of God, individually but also collectively, gather to ask questions, to consider contexts, to wonder aloud about the great issues of the day, and to make decisions on how the love and grace of Jesus Christ is experienced through it all. And in doing so, we are changed into more faithful and mature disciples.

The Session of FPC has determined that Paul's mandate to be transformed by the renewing of our minds is both in line with our history and critical to our future viability as a church family.

I hope you all have had the chance to meet and get to know John Sharp, our new director of spiritual formation. John's gifts align with our commitment to learning. He's a student of the Bible and how we navigate our faith amid the culture in which

we live. He's a gifted teacher and leader, and in his new role, he's shepherding a new chapter in our faith formation programs. I'd like to have John now share with you some details about the learning opportunities available to all of us now and in the coming weeks—ways we can, in community, join in a deeper quest for greater connection to God and each other:

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament famously encouraged his readers in chapter 6 to “leave the elementary teachings of Christ and go on to maturity.”

Being transformed by the renewing of our minds signals a movement, a movement to a deeper faith maturity, a deeper stage of understanding and to a greater level of discipleship. When Jesus called those first disciples out of their fishing boats to follow him, their allegiance moved to a new level. Immediately, they left everything behind and followed him. That should only come after a greater wrestling with the critical factors of our faith. And we're more apt to go deeper in our faith when we do it together.