



September 10, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

## “Changed from the inside out”

What did you want to be when you grew up? I went through several careers in my growing up years. The first thing I can remember was wanting to be a movie star. I wanted to grow my hair long, so that a strand would fall over one eye. I wanted to wear sunglasses and a fur coat. I was five.

By the time I was 8 or 9, I wanted to be a ballet dancer. I read biographies of Russian dancers like Anna Pavlova, who danced until the blood oozed through her toe shoes. This sounded dramatic and romantic to me.

When I was ten, I decided I wanted to be a pediatrician. I wanted to go to Africa and save babies who were sick or starving. If *Doctors Without Borders* had existed back then, I would have wanted to work for them.

When I was fourteen I got the lead role in my high school's fall play: *"The Diary of Anne Frank"*. I was very involved in Speech and Drama through my high school years. I went to college thinking I would major in theater and try to break into the world of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis where I attended the University. I guess one could say that I returned to my dream from age 5, although I no longer wanted the swoopy hair, sunglasses or fur coat.

Various circumstances led me to study French extensively, and by age 19 I had switched my major to French and had married a Frenchman. We moved often, had four children, and I finally got my Bachelor's degree when I was pregnant with the youngest. It seemed I had grown up—and I was certainly blessed to be a mother, but I still wondered *what I would be when I grew up!*

Through my experiences in my local church, and my husband's and my involvement in Marriage Encounter, I eventually heard God calling me into ministry. So, THIS is what I became when I grew up: a Pastor!!

But you know, that question still lurks someplace deep inside me. I know my husband, through his entire working career has jokingly told many people, “I still wonder, somehow, who I’m going to be when I grow up!” Now that he’s nearing retirement, we both are being moved towards a new question, “What will we do when we retire?” I still have ten years to go, so it’s a faint sound in my ears, but it’s there.

We all seem to have an interest in BECOMING. Our hobbies are woven into this, too. We want to become better swimmers, cyclists, runners, tennis players, golfers, skiers, quilters, cooks, stampers, knitters and scrapbookers.

We never stop wanting to BE and BECOME something better and new.

This is a good thing. I believe God made us like this on purpose. God has something HE wants us to BE when we GROW UP. And we can BE it anywhere, anytime. We can BE this as actors, dancers, doctors, swimmers and football players. GOD wants us to BE like .....POPCORN!!!!

Let’s consider this for a moment. What is unique about popcorn? It starts out one way and ends up another way. You can’t really say it starts out one thing and ends up another thing. Because it’s always the same thing—it’s popcorn. But it starts out small and hard and yellow. Then you put it in a popper where it gets hotter and hotter until POP! It’s white, poofy, fluffy, and delicious.

So, what’s this got to do with God? Why does God want us to be like popcorn? Because when we put our lives in God’s hands, God’s Spirit changes us from the inside out--- like popcorn we start out hard and small, then, through God’s Spirit warming us deep within we POP! And we become a **new being**.

Friends, please be aware that this is what you were designed for. Do not think that God wants you to be a Christian so you can **go to church**. God wants you to be CHANGED into something **new**. God wants you to grow up and be.....**like Jesus**. Going to church helps us to do this, but that’s not the END of what God wants, it’s just part of the MEANS for what God wants. God wants us to grow up and be like Jesus because that will bring us the most joy life could possibly bring. And God wants us to be like Jesus in order to **CHANGE THIS WORLD** into what God yearns for—a world of love and justice.

To be more like Jesus, the first thing we have to do is to be like popcorn. We have to get into the popper. Putting ourselves in God’s hands is getting into the popper. HOW can we put ourselves into God’s hands? We’re to fix our attention on God, on what God wants from us. That is an ATTITUDE SHIFT. It happens INSIDE us- in our hearts and minds. When we do this, God changes us, from the inside out.

The Scripture for this morning gives us concrete, specific instructions about what God wants from us. Focusing on these, caring about these, thinking about these, IS fixing our attention on God, and DOES constitute a dramatic attitude shift. I would hazard a guess that most of us don't see these instructions as the most important place to focus and devote our energy in our day to day scramble through life. So, it's a good thing to come to church and hear the Bible so we can be reminded and refocused.

Let's go through the instructions provided today.

*Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.* If you fake love, it twists you up inside. Loving may be difficult, sometimes it's scary, sometimes it hurts. But loving is essential for our well-being. David Watson offers food for thought in his book "*I Believe in the Church*". He writes, *To love... is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one.... Wrap it carefully... with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it safe in a casket... of your self..... But in that casket- safe, dark, motionless, airless- it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable..... The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is- hell.*

*Run for dear life from evil, hold onto good.* One thing to keep in mind here is that evil can be seductive and appealing. We may not have immense difficulty resisting evil that is ugly and horrifying. We have more difficulty with evil that appears good or harmless on the surface. There's an old country western song I remember, where the woman sang, *Somebody's knockin', would you let him in...Lord it's the Devil, Would you look at him? I heard about him, but I never dreamed, he'd have blue eyes and blue jeans.*

*Be friends who love deeply.* This means caring for your friend when it's difficult, when it costs you time, energy and money- when it's not convenient. This means caring for your friend when others are critical of your friendship or your friend.

*Practice playing second fiddle.* Oh, this is not encouraged in our culture. I remember moving to a new neighborhood years ago. We got to know a wonderful family living across the street. Some months later I had the opportunity to introduce the husband, Roy, to another friend. Roy offered his hand and a ready smile. When asked if he worked right in town, Roy said, "Yes, I'm a radiologist over at the hospital." Roy actually was the head of the radiology department at the hospital. That impressed me, because it was unusual. I also knew Roy described himself as a "born again Christian". I sensed that his counter-cultural genuine humility likely had something to do with his faith.

*Don't burn out. Keep yourselves aflame.* What do you love to do? What do you feel excited about? What energizes you? What restores your energy? What soothes your

soul? Every answer to each of those questions is a GIFT OF GOD TO YOU. Whether it be reading mysteries or taking walks, or playing on your soccer team, spending an evening with your girlfriends, or playing drums in a band—THIS IS A TREASURE FROM GOD. Make time for it, make it a priority, balance your life to include these experiences. YOU WILL BURN OUT IF YOU REFUSE THESE GIFTS FROM GOD.

*Don't quit in hard times. Pray all the harder.* This can be a tough one. Our family prayed hard through the four years of my young son-in-law's battle with cancer. But still, cancer took his life last January. I don't want to pretend this instruction from God is easy. I do want to recognize that we struggle with it. One thing I have heard, and have personally discovered to be true is that prayer may not always change things as we wish, but prayer always changes US. Keep on praying. No matter what. Keep on praying.

*Help those in need; extend hospitality.* There are a million ways to do this—and millions of opportunities to do this each and every day. Last week I came home during the Sunday evening storms. My grandson greeted me with great excitement, telling me he and his daddy had an adventure on THEIR way home. A tree had fallen across Route 25, and was blocking the road. “Daddy and other men had to carry the tree, Grammy,” he said. “It was a big tree and Daddy HELPED! Daddy HELPED!” My son assured me later that it wasn't actually a TREE, but a pretty big branch that needed several guys to handle. My prayer is that we would all cultivate the breathless excitement about HELPING OTHERS that my grandson felt that night.

*Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.* This is not just about swearing. It's about wanting God's best for everyone, even your enemies. It's really about LOVING our enemies. Because that's what Christian love is—a decision to treat others and pray for others to be WHAT GOD CREATED THEM TO BE. You want God's best for everyone. EVERYONE. Our nation is in a “time of war”. We need to hear how GOD wants us to consider our enemies. Pray for them. Want God's best for them. This extends to any people we consider “enemies” in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our schools.

*Laugh with those who are happy; share tears with those who weep.* We're a lot better at laughing with the happy than we are with weeping with the sorrowful. As a young child I heard the saying, “Laugh, and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone.” This is NOT God's will for us. Our summer book and movie series was an attempt to follow God's call to look at the sorrow and pain in this world, and be moved by it- in such a way that we're attentive to new ways God may want us to act and speak and live.

*Get along with others; don't be stuck up. Make friends with nobodies.* This is really difficult when we are young- in elementary, middle, and high school. But it can

continue to be difficult throughout our lives. We need to hear this call plainly and clearly—and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in applying it to our lives.

The last instructions are also wonderful but difficult:

*Don't hit back. Discover beauty in everyone. If your enemy is hungry, buy him lunch. If he's thirsty, get him a drink. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.*

I invite each of you to pause a moment at this point. Which of God's instructions do you remember from this list? I'd like to suggest THAT is the ONE for you to work on through this coming week. Is there a "nobody" God wants you to befriend? Are you to take an "enemy" to lunch? Is God asking you to play second fiddle this week? Is there a tearful friend who needs your empathy and time? Is there an evil in blue jeans God is telling you to avoid?

Focusing on what GOD wants from us, is putting ourselves in GOD'S hands. Putting ourselves in God's hands is getting ourselves into the popper. It can be tough. Things get heated up. But all that heat is a gift—because soon, POP! We are changed into something NEW! Changed from the inside out! Into someone who is MORE LIKE JESUS. AMEN! AMEN!