

Youth Sunday Senior Sermons

From the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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By Harper Hoffman

Being a member of the church has been one of very few constants throughout my entire life. I was baptized here, I got dressed up every Sunday morning to come to Sunday school, I think I watched polar express at Christmas movie nights at least eight years in a row, ranging in experience from terrified of the movie to finding comfort in the tradition. I grew through youth camps and covid confirmation projects, to finally find myself standing here today.

Reflecting on these moments I question how much of this participation was based in obligation versus in genuine connection to God. As I started writing this sermon I really sat and thought about why that could be, or what that could mean. I came to the conclusion that my relationship with God is not linear, and that I don't have to know, at the ripe old age of seventeen, exactly what my faith looks like for the rest of my life. All I do know is that it is ever-changing.

Romans 12 is about new life in Christ. It asks God's disciples to be a "living sacrifice", to make the conscious choice every day to surrender to and *trust*

God. This request really stood out to me, and I believe it does because it is an ask that challenges my nature. I thought it meant that I had to die to my own desires so that I could live for God. To give myself up to someone else, as a person who finds the most security in trusting myself fully, seems an incredibly daunting task. However, God is not just anybody, and trusting God, and putting faith in God's ability to "renew my mind" and transform me is a feat I thought I needed to conquer.

My life has been full of transformative experiences. Each of these moments challenged me to be a living sacrifice to God's will and trust God to lead me through them. However, when physically in these times, I find I trust my own intuition just as much. When I read how Peter, James and John were led by Jesus up a mountain to witness Jesus' Transfiguration in Mark, I couldn't help but think of the actual mountains I've climbed mountains myself. I have participated in three separate backpacking trips, two of which were three full weeks of living outside, with people I had just met, facing some of the greatest physical challenges I could imagine. I remember one day in Alaska, ten miles into a fourteen mile hiking day, I found myself carrying a giant backpack full of gear up a very steep hill. After step-after-step completing this very literal uphill challenge, when I reached the summit, I was very tired, but proud of myself and my abilities.

Looking back on that day, I believe that God must have been with me, showing me just what I can accomplish when I trust myself, living and enjoying doing the things that I love. Coming home from those expeditions I felt a sense of transformation. On those trips I had interacted solely with the natural world created by God – yes me, as a teenager in today's world, survived without my cell phone for multiple weeks.

Perhaps trusting God and trusting myself aren't as contradictory as I originally thought. Perhaps trusting myself, as a creation of God, is a way of transforming my mind rather than conforming it to the ways of the world. Perhaps by believing in my own intuition, my own body, I was believing in God's abilities too. And maybe that is what transfiguration is about, seeing ourselves in relation to God in a new way. Being a *living* sacrifice means not

giving up our own desires, but *living* into the desires that God has instilled in us.

I'm pretty sure that learning how to be a living sacrifice is a continuous process. One singular transformative backpacking experience has not stopped me from finding other transformative moments, other transfigurations in my relationship with God. Though I've conquered mountains there are other times, like introducing myself to new classmates after switching schools, or pushing myself to my physical limit rowing a boat in a crew race, that have also transformed me to the person I am today.

I feel I have lived many new lives in Christ, as I'm sure most people have, following God's invitation to change. And, where I am now is not the final exam of my beliefs in God, even though I'm a senior in High School and taking final exams feels like all I do. Though while the majority of you are older than me, I'm not so sure you're at your final exams for belief either. I am still growing in my faith journey and so are you. And we do so with the trust that we are being led in a direction that will land us where we're meant to be—a way that leads ultimately to life.

I have no idea where I might stand in my relationship to God in a few months when I go away to college, or in a year, or in many, many years. I do know that I have always found Church to be a home, and that this home was created as a place of worship to God. I pray that each of us, as we climb our own mountains, continue to seek transfiguration in new ways, and that we continue to see faith as a journey rather than a destination, remembering that being a "living sacrifice" requires just that, *living*. Amen.

By Vivian Hattersley

I sometimes wonder if the way I practice faith is wrong, thinking I'm not doing enough, believing enough, practicing enough. But it is hard to change my ways because I can't really see any evidence of a need to. If things are going well for me, why isn't going to church once a week enough?

When I was younger my favorite part of being a Christian was getting presents on Christmas morning. We left cookies out for Santa and, yearly, got brand new Christmas pajamas. As I got older, I made sure to check the boxes of coming to Sunday School, going to student serve, and completing my confirmation project. I thought that was enough. I felt like I was a good Christian because, at least, I showed up.

With this question in mind, I looked at Mark 9:2-9, the story of Transfiguration. Jesus had climbed up a mountain with his disciples, who likely had some of their own doubts about Jesus, about who he really was. While they were together, he suddenly transformed into a dazzlingly bright body. God's voice then came down from a cloud and told the three disciples, "this is my son, whom I love. Listen to him."

Although we still have questions on how to "perfectly" be a Christian, we can always keep listening to what Jesus taught and said. We never know when Jesus will be transfigured in front of us, that we might see and understand Jesus in a new way. And it is only by going up the mountain with Jesus, like Peter, James and John, that we will potentially get to see that transformation.

I've learned that being a "good" Christian doesn't mean living perfectly by the Bible. More so we must embody Christ in our daily lives, remembering that we too are beloved children of God. Sometimes it is difficult for us to see God's presence outside of a place of worship, difficult for us because unlike Peter, James and John, we don't get to see a physical manifestation of Jesus' holiness.

Honestly, I haven't thought much about my faith in the past few months. My time has been absorbed by senior year activities, college applications, and trying to spend as much time as possible with my friends before we head in different directions next year. I have been consumed with college rankings, acceptance rates, football teams, Greek life, and more. My *Fiske College Guide* is marked up with sticky notes, three different colors of highlighters, and pen scrawled in the margins. But to be honest, I'm terrified to end up in the wrong place. Leaving home is scary, and I want to make sure I make the right decision. And in my anxiety, I am reminded of God.

Figuring out where I'm going to college is my own mountain to climb. I just have to remember that through it all, Jesus is with me. And if I pay attention to him, throughout the whole mess of senior year and college applications, I might just not only get to see and understand Jesus in a new way, but myself as well.

In Romans 12 we read "For 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."

This scripture made me reflect on my priorities, but also instigated a bit of an internal struggle for me. We're surrounded by evidence of God, through God's blessings in our world, but it can be hard to disconnect from our materialistic world and embody a mindset where we do not conform to the patterns of this world. We're constantly told, especially in the college application process, to self-promote and make the most of your accomplishments. Yet through this scripture, I am reminded to think of myself with "sober judgment," with humility. As I climb up the mountain, I must see myself clearly. And that sober judgment starts with the fact that we, each of us, are the beloved children of God, cared for uniquely by the God of the universe.

I'm confident there are many mountains I have yet to climb. I'm confident my faith will change and grow in the next four years, confident that while I'm not practicing faith "perfectly," maybe there is no way to practice Christian faith

“perfectly.” That maybe practicing faith for me is about remembering Christ’s constant presence with me rather than checking off boxes or filling other people’s expectations. My prayer as I head into this new season in my life is that I always remember that Christ is with me, every mountain I climb, and that when I view myself with “sober judgment,” that judgment always starts with the realization that I, like Jesus, am a beloved child of God. Amen.

By Sydney Navarro

From a very young age I found myself comparing my life to others. We live in a world that bombards us with images and narratives of success, happiness, and abundance. It's easy to feel like we're falling short, especially when we compare our journey to someone else's highlight reel. But the more I delved into this struggle, the more I realized that comparison is a thief of joy. It blinds us to the unique blessings and opportunities on our own journey.

I have found myself guilty of taking all of God's gifts for granted. I find myself scrolling through social media, looking at the lives of others and thinking, "They have it all together – the perfect life, the dream job, the ideal relationship." I constantly compare myself to others and the things they have that I do not. I've had my fair share of moments where it seemed like everyone around me had more – more success, more possessions, more seemingly perfect lives. And in those moments, I've wrestled with questions like, "Why not me? Why do others seem to have it all, while I'm here grappling with challenges?" I struggle to appreciate all the blessings that I am granted with each and every day. I have a loving family, supportive friends, and a loving community at church. Yet, I take these for granted when many people do not have the same privileges as me. I take for granted not only God's gifts but God's very self.

Last month when I was reading Romans 12.1-8 it struck me that this mindset was individualistic and materially focused. In this scripture the Apostle Paul lays out that how we engage our physical selves is a reflection of our faith. "Present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice" Paul writes. I found myself checking an imaginary box when I would attend church, that that was enough, that I had connected with God. But that was it, I didn't find myself engaging with God outside of church. I go through the motions of faith without truly grasping the depth of God's love and the magnitude of God's presence. It's not that I don't appreciate God, but in the busyness of life, our awareness can dim, and I tend to lose sight of the awe-inspiring reality of having an Almighty God who cares intimately about my life. I needed to

understand that everything around us is God's creations and I was taking God for granted.

In the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus we see James, Peter, and John encounter Jesus in a new way. They travel up a mountain and suddenly with Jesus appear Moses, representing the law, and the Elijah, representing all the prophets of the Old Testament. And Jesus' appearance changes –from regular man into a bright shining figure. Peter then tells Jesus that they should build three shrines for them, one for Elijah, one for Moses, and one for Jesus. Then a cloud appears, and a voice says “This is my son whom I love. Listen to him.” When Jesus' appearance changes, he presents himself as a God-like figure which gets the attention of Peter, James and John. And their understanding of Jesus radically changes, rather than just a rabbi or a friend, they understand him in a new way, as a vitally important part of the story of faith, as fulfillment of the law and prophets. Jesus is not only a teacher, but is the promised Messiah.

So often when we look at other people, comparing our own lives to theirs, we find ourselves coming up short. Perhaps, when we look at others we miss the divinity in ourselves. Imagine that same voice of God saying over you, “this is my child, whom I love.” While we are not the fulfillment of the law and prophets, nor are we messiahs, nor are we Jesus, we are beloved children of God, invited to view ourselves with the same love that Christ has for us.

When you find yourself inevitably caught up again in comparison, remember this moment of transfiguration, when God's voice claims who we are. Remember Romans 12, where we read “do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind in Christ Jesus.” Amen.