Paul and Professor X – Helping us Become All We are Meant to Be
By Heather Cowie
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The message this morning is based on Romans 12 verses 1-8. In this passage Paul, one of the main leaders of the early church is writing to the church in Rome. This text is one of my favorite passages from Paul's writings, particularly the first couple of verses. I am going to read from the Message, because although I often prefer the NIV, in this passage I think the Message is clearer in expressing Paul's intentions.

**Romans 12:1-8 says,**
**1-2 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.**
**3 I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.**
**4-6 In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.**
**6-8 If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face. (The Message)**

This scripture passage is one that encourages us to live out what we know in gratitude to God and in wholehearted obedience to his ways. It also invites us to become all that we are meant to be in the context of the community of faith. These are great challenges and opportunities, to actually live our belief and not just to express an intellectual assent to the ideas of Christianity.

The first 11 chapters of Romans explains the gospel of Jesus in a thorough and sometimes hard to follow apologetic. Paul explains the gospel starting with the undeniable presence and power of God in creation through to the death and resurrection of Jesus and his ongoing relationship to Israel and the rest of humanity. He concludes the book with some ethical implications. His framework for Romans has a theological beginning and an ethical end.

Theology, what we think about God, is very important because it influences how we relate to Him and how we live in the world. How we think affects what we feel and how we live. The NIV says in this passage, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

In the movie X-men: First Class, Professor Charles Xavier is a sort of Pauline figure. He is the leader among the newly emerging mutants and he becomes their mentor and teacher. In this movie we experience a story of the discovery and use of gifts. Perhaps we can compare ourselves to the evolved mutants in that our transformation from 'ordinary' humans to saints is something beyond our control but that we also participate in.

**Romans 12:1,2 says,**
**1-2 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.**

One of the struggles for the Mutants in X-men is how do they respond to their own uniqueness, do they conform and become like those around them at least in their appearance? Do they hide and let themselves be shaped by their culture or do they let themselves become all they are meant to be? This struggle is particularly poignant for Raven and Hank. In this scene we see how Raven begins to come to terms with herself.

**Clip: Raven (1:23:43 – 1:25:12)**
(Background: Hank has been working on a way to 'fix' the physical mutations that he and Raven have so that they will appear more normal.)
(Knock on door)
**Raven:** Come In.
**Hank:** Hey, I have a surprise for you. I isolated the right marker in your DNA sample. The serum works like an antibiotic attacking the cells that cause our physical mutation. It won't affect our abilities, just our appearance.
You do still want to do this?
**Raven:** Should we have to hide?
**Hank:** You already do. You're hiding right now like I have my whole life. I don't want to feel like a freak all the time. I just want to look…
**Raven:** Normal
**Hank:** Yeah. (Hank gets ready to take serum)
**Raven:** Hank, don't! You're beautiful Hank, Everything you are, you are perfect.
Look at all of us. Look at all we've achieved this week. All we will achieve. We are different. But we shouldn't be trying to fit into society. Society should aspire to be more like us. Mutant and Proud.

How do we become all we are meant to be? How do we live the call of the gospel to give ourselves to God wholeheartedly? How do we change from being 'well-adjusted' to our culture to being well formed in faith and mature? Perhaps the first question is, do we want to become mature or are we satisfied with conforming to the culture around us?

As I was thinking about the idea of transformation and maturity the phrase from this passage, "fix your attention on God' jumped off the page in front of me. It is helpful to have people in our life to help us see what it means to be mature, but if we want to be changed ourselves we must look to God for help, He is the only one who can really change us from the inside out.

Paul's injunction to "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is

the best thing you can do for him." is what life in Christ is about. We are meant to live our whole life with God, not only Sunday at church, or family devotions, or prayer, but all of life offered to God.

I don't really know how we are changed but I know that when we truly offer our whole life, our whole self to God we are. I see it almost every day with the people I walk with in their journey with God, He changes us bit by bit.

Paul encourages us to "Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it." When we listen and respond our capacity to recognize and to respond grows even more. When I seek God and attend to the invitations he extends to me, my ability to hear him increases. When I don't pay attention, when I don't respond to what I hear then my capacity diminishes.

Another phrase that is very important here is the one, "God helping you:" We do not have what it takes to become mature without God's help. I love that the promises that parents and congregants make at a baptism are prefaced by this very phrase, "God helping us". We cannot be faithful any other way. If we want to be our best self, our true self this is the only way.

Back to story the X-men, when Charles Xavier asks Erik to join in the fight against the villain he says to him, "Here you have the chance to be part of something much bigger than yourself." He sees that the unique gifts that the mutants have can be used to bring about a better world.

This scene takes place after the young mutants have been training to learn how to control and develop their gifts to their full potential under the guidance of Charles Xavier
**Clip 2 from training – 1:17:08 – 1:20:03**

(Hank runs and defeats Charles in a race)
**Charles:** Congratulations, my friend. Robert Louis Stevenson would have been proud.
**Alex:** Impressive, Hank. With feet like those all you need is a red nose. Right, Bozo.
**Hank:** I think I'm done here.
**Charles:** Thank you Alex. Come on, Hank.

(Scene shift to Raven lifting weights)
**Erik:** If you're using half your concentration to look normal then you're only half paying attention to whatever else you're doing. Just pointing out something that could save your life.
You want society to accept you, but you can't even accept yourself.

(Scene shifts to Alex trying to control his gift)
**Alex:** Sexy!
**Hank:** Well, this is just the prototype the real one will look considerably better. It will be a whole suit. See, these sensors measure your energy output, this panel focuses it and the excess is absorbed.
**Charles:** Try hitting the one in the middle, just the one in the middle, mind. Good luck.
(Alex hits the two dummies on the sides, misses the middle one)

(Scene in lab – Hank talking to Raven)
**Hank:** You got to see this. Your genes are extraordinary, you know that? Your cells age at half the rate of a normal human. When you're 40 you'll still have the leucocytes of a teenager. You have the most incredible cellular structure I've ever seen.

(Scene on top of satellite dish – Cassidy trying to fly)
**Cassidy:** You truly believe I'll fly this time.
**Charles:** Unreservedly.
**Cassidy:** I trust you.
**Charles:** I'm touched.
**Cassidy:** I don't trust him (pointing at Hank)
**Charles to Hank:** Say nothing.
**Cassidy:** I'm going to die!
**Charles:** Look, we're not going to make you do anything you don't feel…
**Erik:** Here, let me help. (pushes Cassidy off the platform)
Cassidy flies using sound waves.
**Erik:** What? you know you were thinking the same.

(Scene shifts back to Alex)
**Charles:** Wonderful work, Hank, thank you very much. All right Alex, I want you to hit the X and try not to hit me. There's a good chap.
**Alex:** You're serious?
**Charles:** I'm very serious. I have complete and utter faith in you.
(Alex hits only the centre dummy with the X)
**Hank:** Am I still a bozo?
**Alex:** Yes, Hank, you're still a bozo, but nice job.

As in many things in our life of faith there is a healthy tension here. On one hand it is all up to God and we are graced with the gifts we have, on the other it is up to us to be faithful to use and develop these gifts.

Romans 12 continues,
**3 I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.**
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The use of our gifts is ideally done in response to the generosity of God. Paul writes, "I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me." He recognizes and encourages us to recognize that all we have been given is from God for the benefit of the church and the world. We are not obligated through guilt to serve one another but rather invited to express gratitude.

The first question of the third section of the HC says;
"Q: We have been delivered from our misery by God's grace alone through Christ and not because we have earned it: Why then must we still do good?
A: To be sure Christ has redeemed us by his blood. But we do good because Christ by His Spirit is

also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us.
And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ." (HC, part 3, LD 32, Q 86)

We ought to not think of ourselves too highly but we must value our own gifts as well as others. There is a balance here to maintain – we should not denigrate or deny our own gifts and think they are of less value than others, yet we should not be proud either, thinking our gifts are more important than another's. Today, the role that I play or that the worship team has in the service is perhaps more noticeable but no more valuable than the set up teams and the tech teams. And none of these are more valuable than gifts of prayer, giving, teaching DZ, preparing a meal, or caring for a friend. I cannot list all the ways that we contribute to this community because there are so many, known and unknown.

There is a famous quote from Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech, I am sure most of you have heard it before. It is from the book "A Return to Love" by Marianne Williamson, who does not share our view of God and humanity, but it is very appropriate as we think about how we are to use our gifts.

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*
(Marianne Williamson from *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*)

It is true that we are all meant to shine, we are all meant to glorify God. We are all made in the image of God and we also receive unique gifts of the Spirit as we come to personal faith in Jesus. In order to make manifest the glory of God, we must accept and value the gifts we have been given and use them. We are often tempted to covet another's gifts instead of celebrating our own. What if instead of wishing you had the gift of teaching you embraced your gift of giving or mercy and used it within the body to help us all become more mature. Each gift is given for the benefit of the whole and each must use their gift in the community if we are to become the community we are meant to be.

In this scene from the movie we see how the gifts of Hank enhance Charles' gift.
**Clip – Cerebro and Prof. X – 44:16 – 45:48**

**Hank:** I call it Cerebro. As in the Spanish for "brain."
**Charles:** Yes
**Hank:** Okay, so the electrodes connect Charles to the transmitter on the roof. When he picks up a mutant, his brain sends a signal through a relay and then the co-ordinates of their location are printed out here.
**Raven:** You designed this?
**Hank:** Yeah.
**Erik:** What an adorable lab rat you make, Charles.
**Charles:** Don't spoil this for me, Erik.
**Erik:** I've been a lab rat. I know one when I see one.
**Hank:** Okay, great. Are you sure we can't shave your head?
**Charles:** Don't touch my hair.

**Hank:** Okay.
(Charles is able to see where the other mutants are in the world)
**Hank:** It's working.

How we use our gifts is as important as that we use them. In the last few verses of this passage Paul talks about the attitudes that express the love of Jesus in the exercising of our gifts.

**6-8 If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.**

We are told not to take over, not to be bossy, not to manipulate, to be quick to respond to need, not to get irritated and to stay cheerful. I know that I sometimes fail in this area; just a couple of weeks ago I was being very irritable and bossy as I was helping with set up one morning. I expressed my irritation very inappropriately to John. Thankfully, he responded with grace and gave me the opportunity to own my grumpiness and apologize for it. The phrase, "God helping us" encourages me to continue to try to be more Christ-like in the way I live and use my gifts. We can be tempted to use our gifts for our own gain. To puff up our sense of self, to put ourselves in a position of power, to fill our need to be needed, but in the end all these motives lead us to the attitudes Paul warns us against. The verse after this passage says, **"Love from the center of who you are."** (Romans 12:9, Message) Love is what can protect us from using our gifts in a selfish way, and we can only love in this way as we fix our attention on God.

In the movie X-men there is a significant difference b/t how Charles Xavier and some of the other mutants use their gifts. In the end Professor X and some of the other young mutants choose to love even those who have rejected them and to use their gifts to further the common good. Other characters in the movie do not do so. We also have a choice where and how we will use our unique gifts.

Let us use them for the building of God's Kingdom and express our gratitude for all He as done for us in this way.