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In the name of our one God who we experience and know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

There are not many speeches, or lectures or sermons or even conversations that begin with the word *therefore*. Therefore, we will need to unpack a bit of why the reading that we just heard from Paul's letter to the Romans begins that way. Whenever the word *therefore* is used, the reader or hearer understands that something significant came before. We understand that *therefore* marks the beginning of the ending; the start of a summation. Let's hear those words again. Paul says in the beginning of his conclusion, "I appeal to you therefore, ..., by the mercies of God." That word *therefore* just nudges us, teases us, encourages us to find out what his thoughts were that preceded this one.

Prior to writing this, Paul had spilled several pages of ink on God's persistent, dogged, pursuit of a loving relationship with humanity. In those previous two chapters, Paul hearkens back, as any good and faithful Jew would, to the book of Deuteronomy, the book that spells out the law of Moses. It is in Deuteronomy where the reader comes to understand that God is relentless in His call to us; in spite of the fact that we cannot "see" God, in Deuteronomy God affirms through Moses that he is near. In Deuteronomy God implores us to choose life over mere existence. Life for us, as desired by God, is understood as being a life lived in robust relationship with him.

Prior to writing this letter to the Romans, and before writing any letters at all, Paul had been challenged by God to think beyond what he had learned from Deuteronomy. He had by a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ, after having been convinced that Jesus was a terrorizing false prophet bent on destroying Judaism.

In that encounter, Paul discerned that Jesus was instead a gift given by God to all humanity, not just those of Hebrew descent. But that realization did not occur to him the moment he “saw” the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. In spite of the fact that he had been using all of his human abilities and senses to resist “seeing” who Jesus was, God kept nudging him. God wanted Paul to “see” that It was God’s own Holy Spirit that was manifest in Jesus and he relentlessly pursued Paul in spite of his hard heartedness. To get past the wall of Paul’s sense of superiority, God literally knocked him to the ground and blinded him. He was temporarily blinded by the vision he had of Christ. It took months, maybe even years, but Paul went from being a man of hubris and blind determination to being a man of humility and great insight, a man of generosity and love.

After much prayer, contemplation and time spent thinking it all through, Jesus became for Paul a living, breathing access to genuine relationship with the divine. It was through his encounter with Jesus in the form of the risen Christ, that Paul was able to choose life, a robust life, in relationship with God. He had chosen to allow himself, his whole zealous, committed Jewish self, to be *transformed* by the experience of God’s love that had come to him through Christ.

Paul’s response to God’s gift of magnanimous mercy was one of humble gratitude. He knew that he had done nothing to earn God’s grace and mercy and yet it was *given to him, given freely*, in spite of himself. In his gratitude, he gave his life over to God and the mission of Christ. That is why he exhorts his audience, the first century audience as well as the twenty-first century audience, to give ourselves over to the

mission. He was insistent that all we need to do is “present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”

In our world, some people offer themselves completely to God. They might do it by falling prostrate before the altar in ordination. They might choose to commit themselves to a monastic life of discipline. But more often people can choose to give themselves to God by less dramatic means. We can offer our bodies, our minds and our hearts to God by choosing to be present in His presence; by committing our whole selves to being a body through whom God’s will can be done. And more than that, we can commit ourselves to being part of the body of Christ in a community of people who desire to love God as much as God loves us; one that desires to discern and do God’s will.

But you know what happens, don’t you? No matter what we do, the material world is waiting to lure us away from God’s call to us. It is that world, the material world of power, of riches of sensory overload, of tantalizing temptation that Paul warns us not to conform to. Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

In this information overload, media saturated world, the idea of finding the time and the energy to renew one’s mind seems daunting if not impossible. There are millions of marketers advertising supplements to improve brain function. A simple Google search produced a list of the top ten, the first five of which have such fascinating names as Noocube, MindLabPro, LumONol (not to be confused with the forensic chemical LumINol), Addy Focus and Geniux (that’s genius with an “x.”) But I don’t think that is what Paul had in mind (no pun intended). He wasn’t concerned with

brain power as much as he was concerned with the essence of your soul. He was concerned with what centers your life, what motivates and drives your decisions. He wanted that center to be Jesus Christ.

So how can we offer our whole selves to God and also resist being conformed to the secular world? It wasn't easy for Paul in the first century and no one today should think it will be easy for us in this century. The way to be transformed into Christ is to allow Christ to enter in, not remain inside the stories in scripture or inside the stained glass windows of the church. The way to be transformed is to start the process by inviting him into your heart, to be your guide, your shepherd in all that you do. Then, remember that being transformed is a process that can take a lifetime. It can begin at baptism, it can be affirmed in confirmation. It can begin today, right here right now.

Today, let us take Paul's message to heart. As we approach the Lord's Table let us offer our whole selves, our bodies, our minds and our souls to God and allow the Holy Sacrament of Eucharist to begin, to deepen, or to reaffirm the process of our own transformation. Let us commit anew to discerning God's call on our lives and ask Christ to guide us in shaping our response.