

Sandra Stogsdill Brown  
*Re-Formation*  
Romans 12:1-5  
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The movie “Catch Me If You Can” is a 2002 film inspired by the true story of Frank Abagnale Jr., who left home in 1963 as a teenager and became a con man who successfully pretended to be an airline pilot, a doctor, and a lawyer and scammed millions of dollars through fraudulent check schemes, all before his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. At one point, Frank is living in Louisiana and becomes engaged to Brenda, who thinks he is a 28-year-old doctor in the process of becoming an attorney. Her family embraces him, helping him pass the bar exam, thinking their daughter has really hit the jackpot. Then the night of their engagement party, Frank is tracked down by the FBI, and as they’re searching for him, he prepares to make his escape. He takes out the stacks upon stacks of cash he’s been hiding, as his young fiancée watches in shock. And he comes clean to Brenda, saying, “Brenda, I’m not who you think I am. I’m not Dr. Frank Connor, I’m not a doctor, I’m not a lawyer, I’m not a Lutheran, I ran away from home a year and a half ago when I was 16 years old and I’ve been running ever since, but I’ve got enough money for us to live on for the rest of our lives.” And the first thing out of the stunned Brenda’s mouth is, “You’re not a Lutheran, Frank?”

I chuckle at that line every time, because it sounds so funny, yet it also reminds me that back in the day, not that long ago, denominations were a big deal. It mattered to people if you were a Lutheran, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or an Episcopalian in a way that it just doesn’t seem to matter all that much today. I would be impressed if 20% of the population could explain half of the differences between these various Protestant traditions. Some of us here today may struggle with this. [When we Presbyterians go to Grace Cathedral this afternoon,

along with our friends from First United Methodist, to help with the Fall Fun Festival and Trunk or Treat, we may well wonder—now what exactly is the big deal about being Presbyterian? Isn't what we have in common far greater, and more important, than the little things that set us apart from one another?]

When I think about the Presbyterian “brand,” I think about things like the structure of our worship, our system of government, and the fact that in almost any town with a Presbyterian church, the Presbyterian church building will usually look pretty nice, but the Episcopal church will be just a little more ornate and have those awesome, eye-catching red doors (Presbyterians like color too, but we're terrified of being too flashy). [If Presbyterians had a color, it would probably be a tasteful and understated navy blue, or maybe a royal blue when we're feeling really wild and festive.] We like to do things decently and in order, as the slogan goes, and we value critical thinking, and education—we say that God alone is Lord of the conscience.

Coming out of the Reformation as we do, another one of our slogans is “Reformed and always being reformed,” and whenever I hear that phrase I think of today's scripture from Romans 12—do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. It's not a “once and done” kind of thing, but a constant process of refocusing our minds, because the pressure to think the way the world thinks is so incredibly powerful, and our need to be transformed never ends.

“Reformed and always being reformed” is part of our heritage. This is one aspect of our “brand,” along with our respect for scripture and our emphasis on grace, that still makes me proud to be a Presbyterian, even in this day and age where we really don't care whether our children marry Presbyterians or not.

It's just so honest. It is REALLY HARD to not be influenced by the values of the world around us. To not be shaped by our culture's obsession with winning, success, wealth and physical appearance. To not be on our smart phones all the time, to not buy more stuff than we need, to honor the Sabbath by resting and relaxing for one whole day each week, to refuse to buy into the "us" vs. "them" mentality that fractures our society today, It's really hard to practice seeing Christ in each living thing, to trust God to protect us and provide for us when times are tough. It takes real and continual transformation in our thinking.

A few weeks ago, I took my daughter's car over to All Angles Collision Repair on 6<sup>th</sup> and Clay. I was there to get her passenger mirror replaced, because she had damaged it when she accidentally hit a cone while driving on the freeway at night in a construction zone that just seemed to come out of nowhere for her (I have my own stories about knocking mirrors off cars, so I couldn't get too upset with her).

So I dropped off the car, and they offered to drive me back to work, but I said, "Nah. I'll just walk." So I did, and that's an interesting little walk from 6<sup>th</sup> and Clay to 8<sup>th</sup> and Topeka Boulevard. I've driven down 6<sup>th</sup> Street many times, and I've driven up and down Topeka Boulevard literally a thousand times. But you see things so differently when you actually get out and walk. Buildings that barely register when you're driving down the road on your way to someplace else have a way of standing out when you're walking, like the Maj-r Thrift store, and the discount food store, and the store where you can stock up on cartons of cigarettes. When I turned the corner from 6<sup>th</sup> street onto Topeka Boulevard, this put me on the west side of the Boulevard. That meant I walked past the Twin Oaks apartments that are just north of the Pizza Hut. Those big white houses, just right across from the Wendy's. . .

Driving past them, they don't look so bad, but walking is another story. Some of the windows and doors are boarded up, some interesting objects hang in other windows. . . but it was the hostile, misspelled profane message on one door that got me and told me, this is not a happy place to live. It disturbed me enough that I made sure I stayed on the Wendy's side of Topeka Boulevard when I walked back to pick up the car later that day.

You can easily see the back parking lot of our church from those apartments. It hit me that those who live there are our very closest residential neighbors. But they might as well be on another planet—two different worlds, separated by a street corner. I have no idea what to do about it—I don't have the courage on my own to walk over there with a plate of cookies and knock on that door.

This was a moment when I could feel my mind being renewed. It's one thing to be aware that there are some tough living situations out there, and another to walk right past it. It was a wake-up call. It makes the neighbors real. I can't pretend they're not there and that there isn't darkness across the street. [There may be sparks of light over there, too, but there's definitely some darkness.] And I can't keep staying over here and preach about loving our neighbors much longer without doing something, at some point, to reach out!

A question I get a lot as a pastor is, "What are you doing to attract young families to your church?" Now, I hope it is clear how much I love and value young families, but can I just tell you how much I hate that question. When did that become the mission of the church? I don't remember Jesus saying, "Go ye therefore and attract young families."

Behind that question is a whole bunch of assumptions. First, that that's what we're supposed to be doing. Second, when people talk about young families, they are rarely speaking of families with foster children, families headed by single parents, or families on welfare. They

mean a family unit with a mom and a dad and a few children that's stable enough to give time, talent, and treasure towards propping up the institution of the church just the way it is, without the church having to change very much. When people talk about young families, it's often out of anxiety—who's going to make sure we still exist in 20 years?—and less out of concern for actual families.

Third, the question smacks of the values of this world, which idolizes youth, and measures success by numbers and dollars. Those things matter but they aren't everything. They certainly aren't the mission of the church. The mission of our church is loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose. Our goal is not to attract young families, but to be the kind of church that is so focused on its God-given mission that we cannot help but be an attractive community for people of all ages and stages of life. Churches that get stuck in the question, "What are we doing to attract young families" are churches that desperately need to be transformed by the renewing of their minds.

Did you know that there is a whole chapter in the Presbyterian Book of Order that talks about the mission of the church? And that there is line in there that says we are to be a community that entrusts itself to God alone, even at the risk of its own life? Let that sink in for a moment . . .

For this week, let's ponder these things: as we think about your own lives, whether we're Presbyterian, or Methodist, or Nazarene, or maybe we're not sure what we believe or where we belong, what parts of our mind does the Spirit want to renew? What parts of our thinking could use some transformation? How might the Spirit want to renew us, and renew the First Presbyterian Church of Topeka? Do we entrust the future of the church to God alone? If not, what do we trust? And what do we do about those neighbors who are closest to us?

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds . . .  
and what always needs to be renewed is our sense of connection with each other, and with  
families and neighbors of all shapes and sizes, the ones who delight, the ones who disturb, and  
everyone in between.