

## July 22, 2012 - God Has a Green Thumb

This is the last Sunday in our series that we've been doing over the last six weeks or so. We're going to wrap that up together this morning.

In the past several years there has been a series of movies come out called Transformers. These movies are directed by a guy called Michael Bay. Michael Bay is the expert in making movies that are jam packed full of special effects and noticeably thin on intelligible plot. Yet, nonetheless, they seem to be huge blockbusters, almost every single time. Now these movies are part of a recent fad of going back and remaking old TV shows, old comics and old cartoons. In this particular set of movies, these Transformer movies, the general plot is that you have these robot aliens from space who land on earth and decide to take on the shape of various vehicles, cars and trucks. Now, the name Transformers, I think, is kind of an unfair and misleading name. To call these beings Transformers is rather inaccurate because these aliens regularly just kind of change back and forth between their robot and automobile form. A more accurate name for these movies might be: Shape Shifters, or Part Re-arrangers, or Alien Car Hybrids, or something along those lines. Transformers just doesn't seem like an accurate name because transforming, transformation, is about a lot more than just shape-shifting. It goes deeper than just rearranging the parts on the surface. It's much more significant than just alternating back and forth between two different outward appearances, while remaining the same person internally. You see, true transformation is something where the very core, the very essence of a being, morphs from one thing into something new, never to regress or return.

Now, let's be honest, there is no shortage of individuals, companies, or products, who for a reasonably small fee, would like to help you adjust your outward appearance. Do you need more hair, or less hair; do you need less fat or more muscle; do you need to find a different car, or maybe you need to get a new house. Maybe you are looking for the perfect mate, or the perfect job. Maybe what you need is a higher bank balance or better vacations for you to take. Whatever the external change, you think one of these products might improve your life. There is someone who will sell you the secret to making those dreams, reality. However, although some of those things, some of those things may improve the quality of your life for a short period, the impact of your life is often short lived and for the most part, superficial.

But what we are really all longing for is transformation. That change in our life that doesn't just shuffle around the parts on the surface so we look different on the outside, but still feel the same on the inside. What we want is that deep-rooted permanent change that reshapes who we are at our very core of our being. Because we know that when that happens, when we alter who we are in our heart of hearts, the effects will ripple out through our whole life. True transformation is what most, or all of us, are seeking. The Bible gives us some pretty good direction on where to find it. Last week we had a discussion, and I read out of a book, a discussion between a minister and a college student. The college student's opinion was, in the end that, he wasn't really a sinner, he was, in fact, a good person who sometimes did bad

things. The minister challenged that opinion and said “if you are really a good person, then why don’t you just stop doing the bad things?” And the college student says “Well that’s impossible” and the minister says “Yes, that’s right, because you are a sinner.” Now, some people might define a sinner as a bad person who occasionally does good things but I don’t think that’s an accurate or Biblical perspective either. You see, humans are created in the image of God so how can we possibly suggest that people are inherently bad. So what is the answer then.

Last week I suggested that perhaps a better paradigm would be that I consider myself a broken person who sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t. How many of you have had this experience. I originally was going to talk about CD players but realized that was out of date so I updated myself to hard drives. How many of you have ever had this experience with the hard drive on your computer? Things are going fine for awhile and then, all of a sudden your hard drive starts to sporadically not work. It starts to freeze up. It starts to go into kind of an infinite loop or something and it kind of progressively gets a little worse, a little worse, till you find that you are having problems even starting up your computer. And so, if you are like me, you try all sorts of things to get around the problem that your hard drive is malfunctioning so, you will do the control alt. delete, and you’ll hold it for awhile and then let go. That doesn’t work so you’ll do it really quick. And that doesn’t work so you force yourself to push the start button and you hold it and the thing blinks off and then you wait for different amounts of times. Every time you try this you wait for different amounts of times just to see if you can find the right interval and you press it sometimes you hold it long and sometimes you just tap it quick. You try all of these things to try and maneuver around the fact that your hard drive is starting to malfunction. Sometimes randomly your computer will work and it will start and when that happens you do everything you can to make sure you never turn the computer off again. Somehow in the back of your mind you have the hope that this is just a temporary problem. That somehow something inside your computer is going to work itself out and you aren’t going to have this problem anymore but deep down, we know that broken things don’t get better on their own, they just tend to get more broken.

Well, broken people function much the same way. Sometimes things run smoothly and sometimes they malfunction. Sometimes the entire system crashes and we can naively hope that it will get better on its own, but deep down I know that, without drastic repairs to the internal mechanisms of my life, things are only going to continue to digress, and deviate and disintegrate. Well in light of this real world reality, this inescapable human crisis, the Bible offers this remedy in Romans, Chapter 12:1-2:

“Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, then you’ll be able to test and approve what God’s will is, His good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Paul's answer is: Don't rely on the solutions of the World. The answer isn't to try harder; to focus more; to be more determined or disciplined; what you really need is, you need to be transformed into something more than you are right now. The phrase 'be transformed' in the Greek is the word 'metamorphutha' ??? and that's where we get our English words like metamorphosis, or morph, and that's the connotations this word carries with it, it's when you think of a caterpillar that metamorphosis into a butterfly. Or a tadpole that changes into a frog. Paul says, the solution for people is to be transformed, to be metamorphosized if you will. And you can't just transform yourself, Paul says you must 'be transformed'. Paul calls this the renewing of your mind. And that means changing the way you think, the way you see and the way you do. Not just change into anything or whatever, but specifically changing to be in step with God's desire. This is the kind of change that we can't bring about simply by sheer force of will, we need outside help to do it. We need God's help. And the good news of the Bible is, that God is not only willing to help, He passionately desires to do so. You see, from the very first day Adam and Eve left the Garden, God has been working towards one goal: Restoration. He wants to take a fallen world and restore it to it's creation condition. He wants to remove the separation and restore His relationship with man. He wants to eliminate sin and purify human hearts. He wants to take broken down people and restore their lives to His original design.

Restoration in people is much like the process of restoring a classic car. When you find a classic car you take something that was once beautiful and functional and lovely and is now beat up and broken down, it's damaged and dented. Windows are shattered and upholstery is torn. Metal is rusted and parts are missing. Sometimes that's what happens to people through recklessness and bad decisions. Recklessness on our part or on the part of others. No matter what we do as we go through this world, our lives collide and damage is done. Now, I'm no expert in the process of car restoration, so I brought an expert with me this morning. As you listen to him talk, I want you to play out the allegory in your mind, if you will. So when he talks about the car, imagine that he's talking about you and your life. When he talks about himself or the shop-worker, imagine that he's talking about God as He works in your life. As you listen, picture the process of God's restoration occurring in your life from day-to-day. (Video about restoration of cars.)

Some people see these cars and they say "Why would anyone want that, it's just junk" and other people see them and they see something that can be restored, something that is beautiful and lovely. That's how God sees you. Even if all someone else sees is someone who is useless and unredeemable and junk, even if that's all you see in yourself sometimes. What God sees is something beautiful and worth restoring to its original glory. And that's what transformation is all about. Transformation is God taking that beat up old car that is your life and restoring it to its pristine design condition.

I have some flowers up here this morning. Believe it or not, I bought these flowers yesterday. The same bundle. Yesterday they all looked identical (white). They all looked exactly the same. Now, the difference is, I took this bundle of flowers and just put them in water and left

it. I took these and I put them in water and in the water I put in some food colouring. So now, instead of white carnations, I have red ones and green ones and blue ones, and all sorts of different colours of carnations. The reason that works is because the water that's in the jar or the vase, flows through the stem and up into the flower and the colour goes along with it and the colour comes out in the flower. Well, that's kind of how Jesus describes the way God transforms us. Listen again to the words of Jesus out of John, Chapter 15:1-8, Jesus says:

“I am the true vine, my Father is the true gardener. Cuts off every branch that doesn't produce fruit and He prunes the branches that do bear fruit so that they will produce even more fruit. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in Me and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine. You cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want and it will be granted. When you produce much fruit you are my true disciples. And this brings great glory to my Father.”

Jesus says “I am the vine, you are the branch.” The life of the vine flows into the branch like the water flows through the stem into the flower. Transformation comes when the stuff that is in the vine flows into the branch. The greater the connection, the greater the flow. The greater the flow, the greater the transformation.

I don't know if you've ever had the experience, have you gone to a restaurant and they give you the teeny weeny itsy bitsy straw for your beverage? And you sit there trying to take these little micro-sips out of your straw trying to get a meal? When I get a straw, I want a straw with some size to it. I want the bigger straw because the bigger your straw the more your beverage gets out of your glass and into your gullet where it is supposed to be. You see, the maths pretty simple: The more you're connected to the vine, the deeper your relationship with Jesus is, the more God's power can work in your life. Branches that are connected to the vine, grow, and thrive. Branches that are disconnected from the vine, shrivel and die. Jesus says: “There is more to this than mere survival though.” You see, because the branch can never bear fruit by itself. It just can't do it. On the other hand, branches that are connected to the vine will naturally bear fruit. Fruit is the evidence that the life of the vine is flowing through the branch. Likewise, the evidence that God's transforming power is at work in our life, is the increased harvest of fruit. Paul writes to the Galatians and says: Gal. 5:22-23:

“The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against these things.”

You see, it's our relationship with Jesus that has the power to transform our lives. As my

relationship with Jesus deepens, as the power of God works to restore me to God's original design for my life, as God's power works to produce things like love and peace and kindness and self-control, those things become more evident in my life. The results may not be apparent overnight, but they will be undeniable over time.

I was visiting with Robert this week and he told me a story about the head of Compassion Canada. This guy grew up in Africa and in his village in Africa they played soccer all the time. It was just kind of like this ongoing game. They played all through the streets of town and people would kind of join in as the ball rolled by their shop and whatnot. So that's where he learned to play soccer. Then he came over to North America and the local people wanted him to coach the youth soccer team. So he said, "Well, Okay, I'll do it but I'm going to do it my way and you have to be okay with that. The way I'm going to teach this is, each week I'm going to focus on one of the fundamentals of the game. Let's say, for the first week we're going to focus on throwing the ball into play and that's all we're going to practice all week. In the game, that's all we're going to worry about. If we make all of our throw-ins perfectly, then, for us, we've won the game, regardless of what the scoreboard says." So that's what they did.

The first week they worked on throwing the ball in and they did that very well. They got blown out on the score board but at the end of the game the coach was cheering everyone and high-fiving everyone because, yes, we played well because we did that part well. And each week they worked on a different thing. They worked on their corner kicks, they worked on their staying in their positions, which if you've ever seen youth soccer you know that's one of the greatest challenges of youth soccer to avoid that kind of mob of kids running all over. So they worked at staying in their positions, they worked on their passing and each week they worked at their one fundamental of the game and each week they totally lost on the scoreboard. And so they came to the last week of the season and he said "Okay, this is the last week of the season and this week, we're going to work on taking the shot when you have it. So, this week, when you have a good shot at the goal, you take it." So that's what they did. This week, they just happened to be playing the top team in the league the undefeated team in the league. So they went out to play this game. And sure enough, wouldn't you believe it, they knew how to throw the ball in and they knew how to play their position and they knew how to pass. So, while the other team was running around like youth soccer teams normally do, they were putting the ball into play, they were staying in their place, they were passing it around and when they got to the spot, they would take a shot and what do you know, they beat the undefeated team in the league. Well, that's kind of how transformation works sometimes.

It reminded me of the movie The Karate Kid, the original Karate Kid. In the movie, the maintenance man at an apartment building befriends a kid from New York who was getting bullied by some guys at school. To put an end to the bullying, they make this arrangement that Mr. Miagi will teach Daniel how to do karate and he will meet up with these guys at the big karate tournament at the end of the movie. And so Daniel is all excited that he's going to learn karate and so the next day he shows up at Mr. Miagi's house and Mr. Miagi says "Time

to start your training” and he hands him a bucket of paint and a paint brush. And he says “Paint the house, like this, side to side.” And the next day Daniel shows up and he says “Paint the fence, up and down, so you paint the fence” and the next day he shows up and he says “Sand the floor, like this, in big circles.” And the next day he shows up and Mr. Miagi says “Wax on, wax off.” And so after several days of this Daniel gets fed up and he says “I’m here to learn karate, not renovate your house and I’m just fed up with this.” And so, Mr. Miagi says “Okay Daniel let’s spar.” And so he throws a punch at Daniel and Daniel stops it. And he throws another punch and he goes like this (stops punch using side to side motion). And he kicks at him and he goes like this. And all of a sudden you see the light go on and Daniel realizes that all of this painting the fence and waxing the car, what was happening there without him even noticing it, was that he was being trained to do what he wanted to do and that Mr. Miagi was transforming him into someone who knew how to do karate. Sometimes that’s how transformation works in our lives. Sometimes it’s slow. Sometimes it’s gradual and incremental and almost imperceptual, and then one day you look back and you say “Wow! There are some big changes between where I used to be and where I am right now. Paul describes it this way in 2Cor. 3:16-18:

“But whenever anyone turns to the Lord the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is Spirit and where there is Spirit of the Lord there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord, who is Spirit.”

You see, that’s often how transformation works. God works in our lives changing us, shaping us, moulding us, restoring us to who we were meant to be, transforming us back into His own likeness. And it happens in ways like this. It happens when God takes a little shepherd boy named David and transforms him into the greatest King the Nation of Israel ever saw. It happens when Jesus takes a rag-tag group of guys and takes them in and makes them His 12 disciples and walks with them for three years and at the end of it, they are ready to go out and turn the World upside down. It happens in the lives of some of these guys that you may have heard of. A guy named John Clayton, who was a devout Atheist, who set out to write a book, I kid you not, he set out to write a book “All the Stupidity of the Bible” was the book he was going to write. In the process of researching that book he found himself becoming a believer and now, John Clayton goes out and does 40 seminars a year on the topic of “Does God Exist”, and the answer, “Yes He Does”.

Another guy named Josh McDowell, who said he was an agnostic who said he set out to disprove Christianity. In the end of his search to disprove Christianity, he wrote a book that’s called “Evidence that Demands a Verdict” because he too, was converted by this experience.

Another guy by the name of Lee Strobel was a devout atheist by his own admission and his training was in journalism and his wife was converted to Christianity which kind of distressed him a little bit. So he set out to do a journalistic approach to ‘Disproving the Historical Validity of the Bible and of Jesus’. And so, that was his quest and he went out on the quest

he wrote books like the Case for Christ; The Case for Faith; The Case for the Real Historical Jesus; and The Case for the Creator, because, as he went on that journey, Jesus transformed him. Practical examples that might apply to your life. And it goes beyond just conversion, God's transformation can bring peace to the guilt-ridden. It can bring patience to the short-fused. It can bring joy to the down-hearted. It can bring hope to the despairing; Strength to the weary; refreshing to the burdened.

If that's what God's transformation can do in one person, imagine if God took one person who was being transformed and put them in a group of other people. Even one person who was being transformed will dramatically affect the dynamics of the rest of the group. Think of Peter, you may have heard the story; at one point the disciples are on a boat in the middle of a lake and Jesus came walking on the water. He invited any of them to get out and come walk to Him. So Peter was the only one gutsy enough to take the challenge. He got out of the boat and actually walked a few steps and yes, he did actually fall in when he got scared by the wind and the waves, but do you not think that moment had a dramatic effect on the disciples who were in the boat watching.

Think of the young King Josiah in the Old Testament who found the Book of Law in the Temple and realized God's people had not been following God's commandments. This young king 8 years old, transformed the Nation of Israel because God was working in his heart.

Think of the prophet Nehemiah who because of God's transformation in his heart, went back to Israel and rebuilt the City of Jerusalem and rebuilt the walls which was the start of rebuilding the entire nation. You see, groups of people can be dramatically effected when even just one person is being transformed by God.

Think of a family and when a father is transformed to show love and affection to his spouse and his children. Imagine how that affects the whole group. When a wife is transformed to learn to leave to leave work at work and invest in her husband and kids instead. Imagine how that impacts the family. When a child is transformed and free from addiction like we hear our friends at Teen Challenge tell us about every year. Imagine how that affects the larger group of people. Think about it at your work place when one person in the office refuses to gossip. It changes the entire office. When one person in the store insists on treating everyone with kindness, it changes the entire environment. When one person in the restaurant is consistently full of joy and happiness it changes the entire staff. In your neighbourhood, when one neighbour offers help to another. When one neighbour welcomes a newcomer to the block. When one neighbour starts to build a sense of community with the people living around them.

One person being transformed, can transform the whole group. And if one transformed individual can transform an entire group of people, then what if, an entire group of transformed people if they all got together in one place, that should be something really special shouldn't it. Wouldn't you think.

You see, the verse we read earlier, out of Romans Chapter 12, verses 1-2, verses 3 and following, Paul moves on and he starts to talk about the Church. He talks about the Church and how you are all different yet you are many parts of one body that function together with Jesus as the Head. You see, that's God's vision for the Church, it's just a group of people who are being transformed together. And when we look to transform churches, there are all sorts of ways, there are shelves and shelves of books offering to help us figure out exactly how to do that. It's easy to start to believe that transformation will come when we change our paradigm. When we develop a mission statement. When we sing more new songs or more old songs. When we rearrange our schedules or our meeting times. When we start some new programs. When we experiment with some new formats. Sometimes changes and shifts are needed and extremely worthwhile, but none of those things will bring transformation. Incidentally, avoiding those things won't bring transformation either. The only thing that will transform our Church is, if and when, we all individually and collectively and seriously, commit to a deeper relationship with Jesus. To be more led by the Spirit. To better know the Father.

So, I wonder what would happen. What would happen if just three or four of us here this morning dedicated, and I mean really dedicated ourselves to deepening our relationship with Christ. To broadening our knowledge of God. To increasing our guidance by the Spirit over the next month. How much would this Church be different by Labour Day? And what would happen if a dozen of us, here this morning, committed ourselves with growing our connection to the Vine. To allowing God's power to work in us. To permitting the Spirit to grow His fruit in our life over the next six months? How would this Church look different by the time 2013 rolled around? What would happen if a large number of us here this morning, determined to make nothing more important or of higher priority in our life, than drawing nearer to God for the next year? I don't know exactly what this Church would look like 365 days from now but this I know, we would be transformed.