

## 6-21-20 Sermon "Transformation"

On Tuesday morning I did my devotions and reading as I usually do, I answered some emails, and then I showered and went to the church where I had a couple of meetings and then went home for lunch. Now, I don't know if you remember what occurred in the news on Tuesday morning, but the lunchtime news broadcast featured Breaking News of the Supreme Court's ruling that LGBTQ people could sue for being fired because of their sexual orientation. The discussion was all about the enormity of this ruling, how unexpected it was in light of the makeup of the court with its 5-4 conservative majority, and how it was Chief Justice John Roberts, appointed by Pres. George W. Bush, and Justice Neil Gorsuch, appointed by Pres. Trump, who joined with the four more "liberal" justices in this 6-3 decision.

One commentator, though, a conservative to moderate Republican, pointed out that he was not be surprised by the ruling at all, suggesting that the real surprise ought to be that it wasn't a 9-0 ruling. And he went on to point out that as a "conservative" court they are going to decide cases specifically in

a way that “conserves” the words of the U.S. Constitution - in this case, that **all people** are granted **equal** protection, **equal** justice, under the law - and that they would adhere to the legal concept of *stare decisis*, to let the decision, or the precedent stand. And he went on to say that, regardless of what one may think about homosexuality or whether same sex couples should be allowed to marry, **all** people have a right to and are in need of a job, and that business and industry cannot be permitted to discriminate in hiring or firing based on sexual orientation any more than they can be permitted to discriminate based on gender or race. This decision, he suggested, was a truly “conservative” decision by the court, and that a truly “conservative” justice who considers him or her self to be a “textualist,” one who works within the text of the Constitution itself, would not allow themselves or their decisions to be guided by purely political motives. In hearing this discussion, I found my own thinking regarding the perspective of a conservative justice being transformed. The view shared by this commentator forced me to

think differently when it came to this perspective on conservatism.

In our scripture reading from Romans today, Paul is likewise exhorting his readers to “think differently,” and then to “act differently.” After calling to his readers in Philippi, and us, in last week’s reading to be compassionate, to think more of the needs of others than of our own personal needs, this week he goes one step further, telling us to offer our whole lives to God - “our ordinary, sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking-around life.” In the first eleven chapters of this letter Paul talks about how to transform our thinking, but at chapter 12 he turns that towards transforming our actions, our ethics, saying in the Message translation, “So here’s what I want you to **do**...”

And I like the juxtaposition of how the NRSV translates this line compared to the Message version. In the NRSV, verse 2 reads, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The Message phrases that verse this way: “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 God 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."

As Christopher Hutson, Associate Professor of Theology at Hood Theological Seminary points out in his commentary on this passage, "Here is a call for a new way of thinking...The idea in verses 1-2 is that one's whole life - body and mind - becomes an expression of devotion to God."<sup>1</sup>

Transformation, in many ways, resembles death and resurrection - dying to an old way of being and experiencing rebirth or resurrection into a new way of being - a message common to all of the major religions. Paul's message here is a counter-cultural message telling us that we can't continue doing things the way we've always done them, the way the world or

---

<sup>1</sup> Hutson, Christopher R., *Feasting on the Word, Romans 12:1-8*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2011, 375, 377.

society or culture expects us to do them, and believe that that is going to somehow get us closer to who and how God wants us to be. Sacrifice - giving something or the giving up of something - he goes on to say, when done as an act of Law, because "that's how we've always done it," won't bring us closer to God because it asks nothing of us. Paul is calling for more than a mere sacrifice, he's asking for us to change, to be transformed. He's calling us to offer our whole selves to God - not just our Sunday morning selves - and to allow God to use that part of us that we normally hold back, that we keep in reserve. And that if we **do** that, he suggests, God will transform us. As Kirk Byron Jones, Adjunct Faculty in Ethics at Andover Newton Theological School writes, "In Romans 12:1-8, Paul articulates a practical theology that details ways and means for **practicing** love in households of faith and toward the public at large."<sup>2</sup> And Jones goes on to say that Paul communicates what the faithful must do "in order to not be conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of

---

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Byron Kirk, *Feasting on the Word, Romans 12:1-8*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2011, 375.

their minds, listing godly sacrifice, [what the Message refers to as offering our whole lives to God,] radical commitment, sacred mindfulness, transformative grace, intentionality, communal unity, and vocational awareness.”<sup>3</sup>

It is when we are transformed as individuals, Pauls suggests, that we can become the transformed community. “Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of [the] body,” he writes. This is the work of the Grace of God. Using different language, this is the sanctification that takes place in the believer after justification - God shaping, forming, and re-forming us, God working in and on us to make us into the image of God in which we were created. It is not an image that reflects **this** world but an image that reflects the kin-dom of God, where we are all of one body in Christ Jesus.

We are all given different gifts from God - Pauls talks about them here and also in 1 Corinthians - but they are not all the same gifts. In the ongoing course of divine interaction that takes place between us and God when we offer ourselves to God, God

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 375.

will use those gifts to transform us and the church into a sacred community that is transformed to live oriented toward God's preferred future. That is the *teleios*, the ultimate end toward which God is pulling all things. To live into that transformation towards God's desired future is to live *in Christ*; to push against God's desire, God's plan, God's hope for the future, is to live in sin.

With everything that has been going on around Black Lives Matter, not just in the last couple of weeks but over the last many years, like many of us I have been compelled to think about my own role, my own racist stereotypes and tendencies. And while I don't think of myself as a racist, I have to acknowledge that I have certainly benefitted from, and maybe contributed to, racist and racially biased systems in our society over the course of my lifetime. Perhaps we all need to think differently here as well. The events of the last several weeks have laid bare the racial injustice that is knitted into the systemic bones of our country and I believe, and polling seems to be suggest, that there is a growing groundswell of support to make

sweeping structural changes to end at least some of the systemic racial and social injustices that are front page in the news right now.

I read an article this week, and for the life of me I couldn't remember where it was, but Lynn found it for me on the internet when I told her about the article. Jane Elliot was leading a workshop about race and racism, and here's a little of what she said to the group that was gathered. "I want every white person in this room, who would be happy to be treated as this society in general treats our citizens, our black citizens, if you as a white person would be happy to receive the same treatment that our black citizens do in this society - please stand!" Nobody stood. "You didn't understand the directions. If you white folks want to be treated the way blacks are in this society - stand! Nobody is standing here. That says very plainly that you know what's happening. You know you don't want it for you. I want to know why you are so willing to accept it or allow for others."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> [newsreel.org](http://newsreel.org), California Newsreel, Essential Blue Eyed Transcript, Accessed 6/18/20.



Just reading that much mentally stopped me in my tracks. In considering what Elliot had said to the group gathered for her workshop, I was again compelled to think about what needed to be transformed, both personally and societally, in order to bring about real change, real transformation - to bring about the kingdom of God.

Our nation is undergoing a painful rite of transformation, as more and more individuals are beginning to understand the nature of our past and present and are saying, "no more!" It is unfortunate, perhaps even criminal, that as we go through this national metamorphosis, more black men are dying, most recently in Atlanta. As the saying goes, *we've made our beds, now we lie in them*. Our world is being called into, nay driven into a time of reflection, of repentance, and of transformation. But as Christians our belief is that God's grace is at work here, even if it is difficult for us to see.

As another commentator on this passage from Romans writes, "Paul never forgets that we are embodied creatures. Everything we think, say, or do, we do in a body. Presenting our bodies [as

an offering to God] means staying aware each day that our body is the primary location in which we actually express our heart, soul, strength, and mind. If we want to know our inmost motives and values, we can look at what we do each day in our bodies. Everyday in all the places we go, all the things we do, and all the decisions and recommendations we make, we are presenting our bodies. Over time, our actions, choices, and recommendations cumulatively create a body of work, so to speak. Essentially, that body of work is the body Paul is talking about.”<sup>5</sup>

It is this body that we offer to God, in repentance, in grace, in order to allow God to transform us into God’s image in this place, at this time. We don’t do this ***in order to be saved***, but as a faith-filled, joy-filled response to the fact that ***we have been saved***. But it is not easy - transformation is rarely easy.

Frank Crouch, Dean and Vice President of Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, PA, wrote, in what I think is one of the more clearly annunciated criticisms of our culture, or *the world*, as Paul phrased it, saying,

---

<sup>5</sup> Crouch, Frank L., [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), Commentary on Romans 12:1-8, Accessed 6-13-20.

*"In the U.S., we live in a culture that inundates us with advertising designed to keep us conformed to this world. The marketing/media industry spends billions of dollars annually to flood televisions, websites, billboards, email, regular mail. They intrude even on the gas pump screens or the screens on debit/credit card readers. They seek to define us essentially as consumers, individual economic units existing for the sake of larger market shares. In addition, each day our families, friends, organizations, religions, political parties, and society at large pressure us to fit in, to stay within the boundaries of tradition, custom, or practice that marks who we are supposed to be. Not being conformed to this world is a tall order. The world will fight at **every stage** to convince us to look the other way rather than glimpse the injustice, hatred, oppression, immorality, greed, and violence that surround us. It takes transformation, renewal of the mind, to detach ourselves from the world's attempts to occupy us with things that do not matter. Paul implores us to shake off the effects of this world, pay attention to the things that do matter,*

*and discern the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect.*"<sup>6</sup>

When Paul calls the church the body of Christ, he doesn't mean that we are a body like Christ's that is perfect, sinless, and without fault, he means that we are a body that belongs to Christ. We are the body that is to be offered to God, as Christ's human body was offered, in order that the world might be transformed. The mission statement of the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church reads "Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." As I shared, however, in a devotion with our staff a couple weeks ago, "we cannot lead anyone to a place we're not going." That is, we cannot be Christ's body in the world, transforming the world, if we are not being transformed ourselves.

What is it that you see when you look into the mirror each day? Do you see a teacher, a banker, a health-care worker, a retiree, or do you see first and foremost a beloved child of God? What you **do** is only one small part of who you **are**. That is not to take

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

away from that role, however. What you do, regardless of what that is, can be transformative for the world, if you do it as a transformed disciple of Jesus Christ and offer it up to God. When we look in the mirror, when we join together in worship, when we march for justice in the streets, when we recite as the body of Christ the prayer Jesus taught us, we are inviting God to use us, to move us, to transform us, so that as the transformed, we can be one with Christ and one with each other, inviting God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

So, as I've encouraged us previously, we begin with prayer, that God will, as the hymn says, "melt me, mold me, make me, use me;" use me, use us to be the change we want to see in the world. Then we act, we do the hard work of being Christ's body in a world that so desperately needs some Jesus in it - rejecting evil and injustice in all the ways they present themselves. Then we allow that work that we do, bathed in prayer and offered to God, we allow that to transform us, to shape us and mold us more closely into the image of God that we were created to reflect. And in that way, rather than being conformed to the world, we will

transform this world, bringing and living God's message of love and restorative justice to all who need it, from the inside out.

Amen.