**August 13, 2017**

**Romans 12:1-8**

There is a popular Sunday School song that encourages children to be attentive to what they see and hear around them. It goes like this:

“Oh, be careful little ears, what you hear. (repeat) For the Father up above is looking down in love, Oh, be careful little ears, what you hear.

Oh, be careful little eyes, what you see. (repeat) For the Father up above is looking down in love, oh, be careful little eyes, what you see.”

“Oh, be careful little mouth, what you say. (repeat) For the Father up above is looking down in love, oh, be careful little mouth, what you say.”

In the singing of this song, children learn to pay attention to life around them, and think about how God might respond to those same sights and sounds. And likely, in the singing of the song, parents remember to be careful about what they allow to be around their children. We are reminded that not everything in the world around us meets God’s high standards, and if it isn’t good for God, it certainly isn’t good for us.

From our first moments, we both thoughtfully and thoughtlessly teach our children who we are and what we do. We go out of our way to teach them certain things – colors, numbers, names of important people, faith stories, and such. But much of what they learn is simply by exposure to our language and vocabulary and sense of humor and dress code and diet and decorating skills (or lack thereof) and music preference and on and on and on. And as they watch and listen and grow, they learn what it means to be part of our family. They (explicitly and implicitly) learn the difference between those in the family and those who are not part of the family. Children learn how to conform to the world, and how to stand apart from the world.

Truthfully, it’s difficult not to conform to the world. A non-conformist must be aware of every stimuli, and screen every stimuli. A non-conformist must avoid some and seeking out others. A non-conformist would not care of anything they wrote was trending on Twitter. They would never listen to Top 40 hits, or join organized political marches. They live to the beat of a different drum, causing others to scratch their heads and ask questions. You may remember this script from an Apple computer ad campaign [[1]](#footnote-1) several years ago, describing these characters:

“Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

The nonconformists see things differently, and push us to better places because of those differences. That campaign could have been a modern secular translation of the second verse of Romans, chapter 12. Paul wrote, “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.” Paul’s nonconformists see things differently… because they are continually transforming – continually *refreshing*. And because they are continually transforming, they may more easily discern God’s will. Because they are continually transforming, they may push us forward as they see and hear and share God’s will with the rest of us. But it’s not something that just happens to everyone (or else they would be the conformists).

Not everyone is willing or wanting to put in the time and energy to live an un-conformed life. It’s difficult to be selective about what you see and hear and say. It’s difficult to choose God’s words and will over the words and will of friends and family and entertainers and politicians. For how do we actually know God’s will? How do we know if God’s will is what we already hear and see, or if it is different from the world around us? We must spend time with God each day to know the answers to these questions. The simple act of daily prayer and devotion is nonconformist behavior, and doing so will certainly transform your heart and mind. For practicing daily prayer is a choice not to do something else. It’s a choice not to listen to music for a few minutes, or read the news or watch tv or do your chores. Practicing daily prayer is one way of telling the world, “no” for a few minutes, and telling God, “yes.”

Last week I told the story of Daryl Davis, a black jazz musician who went out of his way to get to know members of the Ku Klux Klan in Maryland. The very idea of him choosing to be in conversation with these folks was transformational. But it wasn’t just Daryl who was transformed. Through their conversations, those members of the KKK transformed into people who didn’t want to be members of that organization. Because of Davis, who discerned God’s will to seek out these people who were radically different from and even opposed to who he was, the KKK became inactive in the state of Maryland. That is transformational.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

We are co-workers with God. Working with the time and energy we have. Hopefully, working to do what is right. And the only way we’ll know what is right, the only way we learn God’s will, and arrive at transformation is through discernment.

Discernment has been a big word for this congregation over the past two years. We have spent many hours talking about and collectively discerning God’s will for our congregation. Who is Sweet Hollow? Who is God calling us to be? What is God calling us to do? The easy answers are conformational answers – a dynamic youth group, a loving pastor, young families committed to Sunday School. And that may be part of what God has called us to do and be, but is that the fullness of God’s transforming response, or are those the easy answers we want and expect to hear? Have we conformed to simple, pat, predictable ways of being church, or have we been transformed to hear God’s will, in whatever form that may take?

While we think of transformation happening on big scales – KKK members transformed to people promoting racial justice in the community, critically ill patients restored to health, and so on – transformation happens in small ways, in our everyday lives. We are each formed through our encounters with God. A prayer answered, an encounter that changes us, and the long, slow transformation that happens over years of discipleship. Through these simple, small, sacred transformations, we experience renewal and **re**formation. Like play-doh, our heart and mind are re-formed into something new that is a little closer to God’s will.

This congregation has done it countless times in our history. We were transformed when a few members from Old First Presbyterian Church in Huntington felt called to worship in Melville. We were transformed after closing and reopening the congregation in the 1950s. We were transformed when the Sanctuary moved to this piece of property. We were transformed by John Wallace’s ministry. And many more times between those mile markers, and since those occasions. And we will be transformed again.

The beauty of being in community is that our individual perspectives affect how we experience the collective renewal. As Paul wrote about the varied gifts that each person brings to the community: the prophet, the minister, the teacher, the speaker, the giver, the leader, the caregiver, there is an expectation that each of these folks will know God differently. They will see God from different angles, and bring these unique perspectives into the church. So that the caregiver will learn about God from the minister, and the minister from the prophet, and the prophet from the giver, and so on and so forth. Our transforming relationship with God magnifies and multiplies when we share our unique gifts and perspectives. So that our transformation becomes part of the community’s transformation. And the community’s transformation becomes part of our own transformation. (thanks be to God!)

There is a parable from India about a group of blind men. They had never come across an elephant before, and being blind, they learned what the elephant was like by feeling and listening and smelling. The men stood around its giant body, each feeling a different part of the elephant, but only one part, such as the side or the tusk. The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said, "this creature is like a thick snake". Another man placed his hand on the elephant’s ear and said, “it is like a kind of fan.” The man whose hand was on the elephant’s leg, said, “it has a tree-trunk.” The one whose hand touched its side said, "this creature is a wall." The man who felt its tusk, said that the elephant is a hard, smooth creature, like a spear.

So we each bring our own faith to church – our questions, our assurances, our prayers – and add them to the heap. And together, as we discern who God is, and where God is calling, we share what we have seen and heard in our own lives, and then listen to what our friends and neighbors have seen and heard. We listen in hopes that we will be transformed, and that our minds will be renewed so that we might rightly discern the voice of God in our community.

The Jesuits have a specific way of discerning God’s presence in their communities each day, prayerfully asking God, “where were you today, Lord? What happened? What do you want me to notice?” I’d like to close today’s sermon by practicing this discernment together. Close your eyes. Take a breath. Take another breath. And ask God, “where were you yesterday, Lord? What happened? What do you want me to notice?

where were you this week, Lord? What happened? What do you want me to notice?

where are you at Sweet Hollow, Lord? What has happened? What is happening? What do you want me to notice?”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord.

1. Rob Siltanen, pre-2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Why We Can’t Wait*, 74 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)