

sermon-08/24/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Conformed or Transformed?”
Rom. 12:1-8
Jim Patten

Paul’s letters often end with advice on how Christians might act. Paul wants our actions to be consistent with what we believe. It is hard to preach those sections of his letters without sounding preachy or judgmental. Consequently, I usually choose the gospel or the Old Testament passage as the sermon text. I chicken out, in other words.

But, Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is one of his most important letters. He had not yet visited that church when he wrote this letter. He wanted to carefully outline what he believed and the implications of those beliefs on our behavior. If you are going to choose one letter to explore the practical implications of our beliefs, Romans would be a good choice. So, here it goes!

Chapter twelve is all about transformation as opposed to conformation. We are to be transformed by the gospel into people who hold a different set of values than the culture around us. That is very different than being conformed to the world’s standards. He begins this discussion talking about worship.

Those of us who want our religion to be intellectually honest appreciate Paul’s remarks here. He says worship is intimately connected to how we think. The Jerusalem Bible’s translation of Romans 12:1 says this most clearly. Paul writes, “Think of God’s mercy, my brothers and sisters, and worship God, I beg you, in a way that is worthy of thinking beings. . .” Don’t check your head at the door, in other words, when you come to worship.

Many of us find this particularly comforting. Transformation is not about blind allegiance to church doctrine or some charismatic leader. We can be in the process of transformation and still have questions and even doubts about what we believe. A renewed mind can still think critically. It is more that a renewed mind has a different context out of which to do that critical thinking.

Worship enters into the discussion at this point. Transformation begins with a commitment to worship God, to worship that great mystery we say is the ultimate reality. Such worship helps us gain perspective. That which is not ultimate ceases to take on ultimate importance. We can give our best energies to the big things instead of getting bogged down in trivia.

Let’s get a little more concrete here. What does a transformed person look like? How does a transformed person act? Perhaps the best way to answer those questions is to talk about the opposite of transformation. Let’s talk about conformation.

What does it mean to be conformed to this world? If we take a closer look at our world in the 21st century we can easily detect what the priorities of our culture are. We value

beauty. That sounds wonderful. But we tend to value surface beauty, and even sexualize it, encouraging lust. We end up ignoring the far more important beauty our eyes can't see.

We value those in positions of prestige. We value the powerful. We value those who can entertain us. We value those who are tough. If you question that set of values, just look at who our culture rewards with money. How we pay someone is one of the clearest ways to see what we value. Apparently actors, athletes, and CEO's of some of our larger companies, are far more valuable than teachers, social workers, those who work with their hands and those who raise our children.

If you still have questions about what we value, look at how we do politics in this country. We value a politician who can project an air of toughness. We don't like it when our politicians admit they made a mistake, or change their minds on an issue. I read recently that if a candidate is behind in the polls, the best thing they can do is to run attack ads. That bit of advice has been proven to be correct time and time again.

Most people I talk to say they hate negative campaigns, but they seem to work. Apparently we value those who can put down others or who simplify the issues into black and white answers that don't require us to think.

To be conformed to the world is to go along with those values. It is to give in to our lust for sex or power, our greed for money and things, our ability to project a toughness that makes us feel less vulnerable. To be conformed to our world is to value success over integrity, the bottom line over compassion, and comfort over faithfulness.

If that is what a person who is conformed to this world looks like, then what does a transformed person look like? Paul says those who are being transformed have a different world view. They think and act as if they are citizens of God's commonwealth. That means they judge their own life by a different set of standards than does the world. This leads to a deep humility.

Citizens of God's commonwealth value gifted people, but they value those gifts that build up the community. The gifts we have been given are not for individual fame or admiration. As one commentator writes, the purpose of our gifts is to assist others in their life journey toward God. That is why Paul pushes the gifts of teaching, compassion, generosity, and exhortation.

Those whose minds are being transformed still use their minds, but they do so in a different way than those conformed to the world. They see things through a different lens, the lens of trust or faith as opposed to the lens of intellectual pride or the desire to win an argument because we are smarter or more quick witted than our adversary.

All this is to say, as that same commentator put it, Christians are to be shaping the culture rather than being entrapped by the culture and the sick values we see all around us. That is why baptisms are so important. We baptized Leif today. We promised to raise him to

see his allegiance to God as his number one allegiance in the world. We promised to raise him with values consistent with the commonwealth of God. We promised to help him use his gifts to build up the community rather than to gain power, prestige, or wealth for himself alone.

May we all remember our own baptisms and worship God by allowing God's transforming power to shape our world view and help us fight against being conformed to the world. Amen