

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)

Romans 12.1-8

August 24, 2008

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Has there ever been a familiar but ho-hum passage in Scripture that all of a sudden took on new life for you?? There's a verse in this weekend's epistle that I've heard a hundred times and that always left me cold. I was puzzled and kind of curious not too long ago when Pastor Mark told me it's one of his **favorites**. Here it is, from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12, verse 2:

Do not be **conformed** to this world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your minds....

“Do not be **conformed**... but be **trans** formed....” The Holy Spirit opened up a new window in my heart this last week, so that those words began to intrigue me. I thought of how often we **do** conform to the world around us, allowing ourselves to be shaped and controlled by outside forces, like a liquid that takes the shape of its container, **whatever** its container happens to be. We don't intend to be like chameleons that change to match our environment, but unintentionally that's often what happens.

I heard an interview with a World War II veteran recently. After proudly acknowledging the accomplishments of his generation, he admitted that he looks around today and asks, “But for **what** did we **save** the world?” He was reflecting on how oblivious many people are to the gifts of life and freedom and abundance. I thought of the depression and sense of purposelessness that seems to afflict many young and not-so-young people today. Their hopelessness is a by-product of a culture which knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing, in which individuals are anonymous and isolated, self-absorbed, living lives which fulfill their own desires but don't serve anyone else's needs, protected from the pain that comes from recognizing others' suffering, and devoid of the joy that comes from alleviating it.

“Do not be **conformed** to this world, but be **trans** formed....”

When we're conformed to this world, we travel with the pack, we get away with what we can, we look out for number one, we do what is expedient, not what is right. Like water, we seek the lowest level. We don't allow our weekend faith to influence our weekday behavior. We are hypocrites, because we claim to be Christians, which means “followers of Christ”, but we do not **follow** in Christ's footsteps. We are like liquids, who assume the shape of whatever container happens to hold them.

“Do not be **conformed** to this world, but be **trans** formed....”

When we refuse to be conformed to a world that doesn't know or love or serve God, when we are anxious to be transformed, to become a new creation, then we are no longer like a liquid that has no shape of its own, that is always at the mercy of its environment, but we become like a solid, like soft clay or dough in God's hands.

I love to make pies. I use my sister Sharon's “perfect piecrust” recipe, and it works like a dream. The dough is soft and moist; it doesn't crack when you roll it out, it forgives mistakes, it stretches for miles, it seems, it lets me ripple the edges or weave a latticework top or punch hearts or apples out of the top crust to make it pretty. If one of my pies were sent to an FBI lab, I could be identified as the baker by my fingerprints cooked into the crust. Along those lines, I hope **God's** fingerprints are imprinted in my life, visible on close examination for all the world to see.

Refusing to be **conformed** to the world and **longing** to be **transformed** by God's Holy Spirit means we'll be swimming against the stream much of the time. We're the ones who tell the surprised clerk at the store that she's given us too much change. We're the ones who give our vacation time to a grateful coworker we barely know because he's used up his sick time and needs more. We're the ones who share generously with our church family, not because we have more money than we know what to do with, but because we realize to live **is** to give. We're the

ones who don't bemoan the state of the world and passively wait it for it to self-destruct, but who **love** the world we refuse to conform to, and who work tirelessly for God's kingdom to come, for **God's** priorities to become **our** priorities in this world Christ died to save. We agree with the first letter of Peter, which tells us **why** and into **what** God transforms us:

...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2.9)

There's a wonderful story about Abraham Lincoln, who after a Union victory in the Civil War, was approached by a clergyman who gushed, "Aren't you glad God is on our side, Mr. President?" The President responded, "I'm not concerned about God being on my side, Sir. I'm much more intent that I be on God's side." There's a man who was transformed and transforming.

Once we stop assuming whatever shape the world wills on us, once we withstand the pressures to buy into a consumer culture that claims our value as a human being is equivalent to our net worth, once we are transformed into true followers of Christ who actually follow where Christ leads, then we who are powerless in the world's eyes are powerful enough to transform the world. We may not be issuing Emancipation Proclamations, but there **is** other important work for us to do.

There's a young man who just graduated from Ohio Wesleyan College, a fellow named Jesse Gene who grew up in the inner city of Washington, D.C. When interviewed, he said he was born with the ability to go against the grain, (to resist conforming), and that has been a saving grace in his life – that and the intense interest and passionate commitment of two women who worked in the teen center on his drug-plagued block and who are now surrogate mothers to him. Jesse's parents died in a murder-suicide tragedy, his sisters succumbed to the drug culture in which they'd grown up, and his grandmother and uncle are afflicted with alcoholism. Night after night he was determined he would make it safely to the oasis of the teen center a few doors

down from the apartment building in which he lived, and that someday he would make it safely out of the inner city. He acknowledged becoming a loner in a neighborhood where there were no healthy friends to be had. Jesse was not a liquid that assumed the shape of his container. He was soft clay shaped by the hands of caring people and a compassionate God.

Now with his college degree in hand, Jesse whose life has been transformed is looking for a way to transform the tough world in which he grew up. In the not-too-distant future he hopes to multiply and enhance the urban teen centers that serve as arks to drowning youth. Jesse wants to help others become strong enough to go against the grain, to refuse to conform to a culture of death, to be transformed into young people who embrace life and who find a life-giving purpose for their God-given gifts.

The translation in *The Message* of the “Do not be **con**formed... but be **trans** formed...” passage is:

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 inside out. Readily recognize what he 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.

It's never too early **or** too late in life to refuse to conform and to be transformed instead.

Transformed ourselves, we're ready and able to transform the world, following in the Son's footsteps, according to the Father's plan, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham