

“At Odds With the World”
Text: Matthew 5:1-11; Romans 12:1-8
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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. Romans 12:2

American Presbyterians are not normally labeled as nonconformists. By nature, we don't like to draw attention to ourselves. We are usually less than flashy in our appearance; we are civil in our discourse. We are rarely seen emerging from tattoo parlors. We are hardly ever heard saying to our hair stylist, “I believe I'll have a mullet this month.” Historically in America, Presbyterians have been more likely to be members of the establishment than radicals who take to the streets waving signs and chanting, “We want change. When do we want it? Now!”

This association with conformity, however, has not always been the case. In England after the Reformation, nonconformists in the Church of England were those who refused to conform to the agreement that had been made between the church and the state. For the sake of conscience, nonconformists, as these Christians were called, read Romans 12:2 (*Be not conformed but be transformed . . .*) as a specific invitation to dissent from the conventional political and theological wisdom of the day. (1) These nonconformists were the ancestors of America's Puritans. The nonconformist colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, established in the early 1600s, were meant to be models for how a particular people could live in an ideal community, both in the world but not conforming to the values and the standards of the world. (2)

In the 1980s I served a Presbyterian Church in Decatur. We were wrestling at that time with what it meant to be in the world but not of the world, and out of our study of Scripture and our growing understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God, we decided to participate in a trip that people of faith from all over the country were making to Washington. We were to march from the Pentagon to the National Mall on behalf of homeless men, women and children across the nation. The group of Presbyterians who got on the bus was about as conventional as you can imagine. We all went to work, raked our lawns, paid our bills. But we also had a vision of how life on earth was supposed to be, and so we decided to take some action. Off to Washington we went.

Actually, hundreds of thousands of people from around the country gathered in the parking lot of the Pentagon and then marched downtown carrying signs, singing hymns and asking for a rearrangement of national priorities. I remember that one in our number was a woman named Ruby Wright, who was the cook at

Our House, the first day center for homeless children in DeKalb County. She had never been out of Atlanta in her life, and she was anxious as she stepped out of her comfort zone. But once Ruby and the rest of us got to Washington, we were as happy as we had ever been. It felt as if we were “marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion, the beautiful City of God.” We were marching toward that day when Christ's great kingdom will come on earth, and there will be no more crying, or suffering, or tears because the former things would have passed away. (Revelation 21: 4) None of us were in our comfort zone, and yet we felt strangely exhilarated, renewed in our minds and hearts, so happy to be close to that place promised by God, where the least shall be heard and considered alongside the greatest, where, as the great jurist Learned Hand said, “where not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded.”

I'm glad that I stood on the streets of Washington and asked for justice 20 years ago on behalf of people whose voices often go unheard. I understand there was a large march yesterday on Washington, hundreds of thousands of people from around the country, concerned with government in general, and issues of health care in particular. I was reminded that we all have a civic right to express ourselves and to take part in national debates. As Presbyterians, we hold dear the notion of the sovereignty of God, that God is active beyond the walls of the church in the broader realms of society and culture. Because God is there, we need to be out there ourselves. I hope when we advocate for a point of view, we will not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds so that what we advocate for will be in line with the priorities Jesus expressed in the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. If anything ought to be said from the church about the current healthcare debate, it is that it is that having concern for our own health care is not enough. Concern for ourselves cannot trump concern for the well-being of others. It has to be both/and not either/or.

These are not easy times to live “under the restructuring power of God's grace,” but it is possible now, as it was possible in the first century, as it was possible in America in the 1960s, in the 1980s - I love this translation of Paul's original Greek: “Do not let yourself be shaped by what everybody does, but rather let yourself be shaped by a whole new way of thinking.” (3) It is possible, through “the mercies of God”. Listen, Paul is not promoting nonconformity as a virtue in itself or encouraging oddity for its own sake. He is announcing the reality that if you follow Christ, you're not going to be in step with everybody and everything that is already in place out there in society. But you can be a nonconformist in a way that helps to transform the world.

Gandhi once said, “We must be the change that we wish to see in the world.” It starts with our minds, the renewal of our minds. When we see the world in a way differently from the conventional way, then we're on the right track. When we put on what I might call “gospel glasses,” things look different. Conventional wisdom says it's best to adjust oneself to the way things are, because if you don't you'll

go crazy. Transformed thinking says, "Follow Christ, follow his way, and you will be happy and in the kingdom groove."

Conventional wisdom versus a transformed mind: I think of how Margaret Mead said once that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, that's the only way the world has ever been changed.

I think about the transformed thinking of Martin Luther King Jr., who preached that, "Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted." For Dr. King, God was the ultimate change agent; Christ, the most dedicated of nonconformists. One of his most challenging sermons was entitled "Transformed Nonconformists." In it he spoke about the nonconformity of the first century Christians, whose witness was not shaped by the Roman Empire but by the values and claims of the kingdom that had been established by a Palestinian Jew, right in the heart of the Roman Empire. He had healed the sick and offered an alternative vision of neighborliness and compassion. He gave bread to the hungry; he identified with the lost and the left out. He was crucified for all of that, but that wasn't the end of the story, because he rose again from the dead. We affirm that every week when we say the Apostles' Creed. His early disciples were men and women who had resurrection faith. They knew that the world of which Jesus spoke and taught was the real world, and so they were willing "to sacrifice fame and fortune, even life itself." They were "quantitatively small," but King said, they were "qualitatively giants". They ended the barbaric custom of infanticide; they stopped the gladiatorial contests and finally, "they captured the Roman Empire for Christ," (4) They were not conformed to this world. They were conformed to the new world that God in Christ was surely bringing into being upon this earth.

These days I'm doing some reflecting on 30 years as a minister, hoping to renew my own mind and get a fresh perspective on my life and work. I've had a wonderful time recalling many joyful experiences, and many funny ones too, like the time we told our then six-year-old daughter, who wiggled a lot in church, that it would be all right if she read during the sermon. The next Sunday, I had barely finished reading the scripture passage, when I heard a loud rattle and I looked down, and there was Elizabeth on the second row holding up the funny papers.

There have been mountaintop experiences and there have been low valleys. With millions of Americans, I have recalled that deep valley of eight years ago, and how in church on the Sunday after the 11th of September, we clung for dear life to the promise of the Psalmist, that "though the world should change and the mountains tremble, there is a river whose stream makes glad the City of God. God is in the midst of her and she will not be moved." (Psalm 46)

As I do my historical review, I realize what a privilege it has been to have been called to a vocation that has often asked for the best in me and asked me to reach deeper and deeper. Hopefully, I have done that more often than not, but

there were times when I failed, and I have come to think more soberly of myself when I have reflected on them. Usually I'm able to balance the pastoral and prophetic aspects of my calling, but sometimes I and the congregations I have served have been too timid. The boat needed to be rocked, but we stayed still; we settled for the *status quo*, when God was yearning for us to step out in faith. I grieve over those times that my pastor's heart and my Southern woman's need not to make anybody mad kept me from having a stronger and more faithful voice. I'm glad that I have always, always advocated for the inclusion of all people into to the ordained offices of our church, all whom God calls, regardless of sexual orientation. I have not failed on that front, but I particularly regret that I did not, in 2003, speak out against the beginning of the war in Iraq. When told by our national leaders that there were weapons of mass destruction ready to be used against innocent people, I believed them. I wish now that I had had the courage of so many Christian leaders around the world and most faith leaders in this country, who voiced opposition to the war in the very beginning. I hope God will forgive me for that failure.

I hope that Morningside Church will always be the kind of congregation where different points of view are welcome, where moral discourse is encouraged, where we engage every day in ministries of mercy and compassion, but where we also grow in our commitment to justice and to advocacy in our city, and in our state, and our nation. I hope we will listen to Jesus' voice with more attentiveness than to the voices of the world. As Frederick Buechner puts it so well, "The world says Mind your own business. Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says Law and order, and Jesus says Love. The world says, Get. Jesus says, Give. In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy, and anyone who thinks we can follow him without being just a little crazy too, is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion." (5)

Jesus went up to the mountain, and he called his disciples only four at the time, two sets of brothers - James, John, Simon, Andrew. They had left everything, their nets, their boats, their families. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "They literally had nothing in the world, but everything through and with God." (6) They listened as Jesus sketched out this alternative life, the alternative community, the alternative set of values. In the Roman Empire, in the imperial world, wealth, status, power - those were to be prized. But in this alternative community – "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn. (Luther translates this as 'those who are sorrow bearers', those who are willing to bear the sorrow of others.) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

It is so odd to me that the Beatitudes have become like warm milk and cookies by the fireplace to many of us. We love the way they sound, these Beatitudes. (7) But if you drill down deeply, you realize immediately that Jesus intended to disturb the comfortable and to comfort the disturbed, the downtrodden, the poor,

the ostracized. He was not only announcing radical change, he was inaugurating it. The most serious charge brought against Jesus when he appeared before Pilate was, "He stirreth up the people." (8)

It's legitimate to ask: What in the world do we do with his vision today, in our complex world? You and I are not prime candidates for radical discipleship. We are who we are, and God calls us to be faithful where we are. But I believe the Beatitudes can bless us too. I think at least they can give us a kick in the pants, so that we will not become so accustomed to going along, so that we will understand that we are put on this earth to bear witness to another way of doing things, another way of treating our neighbors. We can at least not laugh at the next racist or sexist or homophobic joke we hear. We can at least try to make peace with that family member, from whom we are estranged. We can at least notice that there are now 40 million Americans living below the poverty line, and more falling into poverty every day.

I've been inspired by the response of the American people to the eighth anniversary of 9/11 by how many have gone out and served their neighbor and done things that helped people whose lives have been devastated by other disasters, in honor of those almost 3000 who lost their lives. My husband, Al, had a law partner in New York City. His name was Glen Winuk, an attorney for Holland and Knight. His office was not in the Twin Towers, but across the street. When he realized what had happened, he ran out of his building, and because he was trained as a volunteer firefighter and as an EMT, he ran in to the first tower that was hit, which was by then, a blazing inferno. He was there to do what he could to help. Glen lost his life in that effort. In his memory, his brother has begun a national effort to make 9/11, every year, not a holiday, but a day of compassion, and caring, and getting out of our own comfort zones.

No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You and I will likely never be asked to do such a thing, but because we are baptized into Christ and into his promises, as were Catherine and Elizabeth just a few moments ago, we are citizens of that kingdom that is not of this world.

May we be ready, you and I, to present ourselves as "a living sacrifice," to offer self-giving love to friend and stranger, following the way of Christ, who laid down his own life that you and I might have life everlasting.

(1) Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Harper One, 2007, p.46.

(2) *Ibid.*, p.50.

(3) Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, John Knox Press, 1985, p.195.

(4) Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love*, Fortress Press, 1981, p. 25.

(5) Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*.

(6) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM Classics, 2001, p. 60.

(7) Peter J. Gomes, *Strength for the Journey*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, p.30.

(8) As noted by Gomes in *The Scandalous Gospel*, p. 47.