

BE TRANSFORMED

Romans 12:1-8

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First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs
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I.

Last Sunday, I mentioned a book by Martin Thielen entitled “What’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?” The book is divided into two parts. Part I is called “Ten things Christians *don’t* need to believe.” The first three things Christians *don’t* need to believe are: That God causes cancer, car wrecks, and other disasters; that good Christians don’t doubt; and that true Christians can’t believe in evolution. Part II is called “Ten things Christians *do* need to believe.” Last week, I highlighted the first, that Jesus, and the question of his identity, are central to what it means to be a Christian.

The eighth thing on Thielen’s list has to do with the church. According to this seasoned United Methodist pastor, Christians must believe in the relevance of the church because, “in spite of its flaws, the church is still God’s primary vehicle for doing God’s work in the world and every Christian needs to belong to one.” Beginning to describe what he means by “church,” he tells the story of a man from up north on business trip in Durham, North Carolina. His first morning in town, he went to eat breakfast at a little mom-and-pop diner close to his hotel. The waitress came to take his order. He ordered eggs, sausage, and toast. When the waitress, a Southerner, brought this Northerner his order, he noticed a pile of white stuff on his plate.

“What’s that,” he asked.

“Grits,” she said.

“What is a grit?” he asked.

“Honey,” she drawled in her Southern accent, “they don’t come by themselves.” Thielen observes: “Grits don’t come by themselves, and neither do Christians.”

We gather together on this “Visioning Sunday,” to open our minds, our hearts, and our bodies to discover again what it means to belong to God and to one another. We gather to encourage each person to listen deeply and to find one’s voice. When we listen, we listen for the voice of God and the stirrings of our own souls. In some cases, these may be one in the same. The voice may be what the Bible calls the “still small voice of God,” it may be the transforming voice of Jesus turning our world upside down, or it may be the passionate prompting of the Holy Spirit saying get up and *do* something, to speak, rejoice, and sing. But we are also here to listen deeply to what *others* are saying and to how God is speaking in the life of someone that is different from us. As Thielen says, “Christians ‘don’t come by themselves.’ They come in communities.” So we gather to discern what it means to be a community of Christ in Colorado Springs on the corner of North Tejon and Saint Vrain in 2011.

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means, literally, “a people called.”

Today we dedicate ourselves to exploring questions such as “Who are we as a people being called by our God to be, and what are we as a people being called by our God to do?” Then, other questions may reveal themselves, questions such as, “How are we going to go about responding to God’s call? What is most important to us? What can we let go of? What are the differences and tensions that we need to be aware of? And, how can we learn to see our differences as gifts rather than burdens?”

II.

Many folks in this church, and in our society as a whole, are suspicious of institutions, including the institutional church. Many times have I heard folks say, “I don’t believe in organized religion.” In response, I have delighted to say, “Good news. We’re not very organized.” If we’re honest, though, we have to admit every community is an organization with its own history, values, and sets of norms.

I remember when I realized the futility of trying to be a pure non-conformist. I was in my early twenties, trying to find myself, and, in some sense seeking out alternative community, which was linked, of course with alternative music. I was stoked to have tickets to attend the Lollapalooza music festival at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View, California. The Smashing Pumpkins were playing, along with the Beastie Boys and A Tribe Called Quest. At some point between almost getting killed in the largest mosh pit I’d ever had the stupidity to enter and having my shoes thrown up on, I realized that this event was not all that alternative after all. Most people there were, on the whole, dressed in exactly the same outfit, or version thereof. These bands were making thousands, if not millions of dollars, recording and performing their music. What began as an “alternative” became another version of the mainstream.

While we should have a healthy suspicion of institutions, we need institutions because we need each other. The church in general and our church in particular is, we might admit, an institution. The work of visioning and planning and implementing change is difficult because, as church consultant Dan Hotchkiss writes, “Institutions naturally resist change - not because the people in them are especially conservative, but because conserving is what institutions do. They codify and repeat patterns of behavior - building trust by repetition, growing in proficiency by practice, building a clear ‘brand’ through consistent and predictable performance.” “All institutions resist change,” the consultant continues, but “communities of faith resist it for a special reason: almost anything they do regularly quickly becomes part of somebody’s religion. The oddest things turn sacred:” furniture, schedules, expectations, attitudes, routines.

This is, I believe, what makes the church so lovable and frustrating. As I heard Rev. Douglas Fitch of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco once say: “The church loved me into vital life. For this reason, I love the church, but I am never satisfied with it.”

III.

I think Saint Paul was speaking with a mixture of love and dissatisfaction when he told the nascent church in Rome: “I appeal to you, therefore, sisters and brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you will discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

This passage, as a matter of fact, was the one given to me at my confirmation. Since that time, I have come to see my ministry in the church and in the world, as an attempt to understand and respond to the claim these words make on my life. “I appeal to you,” Paul says. You can almost hear him pleading with the members of the church. “To present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

I love how this phrase breaks down the body/spirit divide. Paul seems to be saying to the church: “Stop being so religious. Stop going through the motions. Stop presenting dead sacrifices of slaughtered pigeons, worn-out rituals, and external gestures without an inward movement of the spirit.” What God wants is *you*, and when you show up with your whole self, body, mind, and spirit, that’s when true worship happens.

It took me a couple rounds of teaching this church’s Confirmation program before I realized that our teens were not poor spellers when they wrote the word “Confirmation”: C-O-N-F-O-R-M-A-T-I-O-N. “Do not be conformed to this world,” Paul writes, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you will discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The whole point of this thing called church, this thing we call the Body of Christ, this thing we call the resurrected life, the whole point is to be transformed... to transform the lives of individuals and communities.

In her book, “Praying with the Body and Soul,” Jane Vennard shares a distinction that was helpful to her as she understood the role of the church in her life. The distinction is between a “collectivity” and a “community.” “The member of a collectivity,” she writes, “is expected to uphold the belief system at whatever cost to individual questions, concerns, or doubts. At times, this expectation can provide safety and reassurance to the individual... at other times, the expectation of the collectivity feels stifling and confining, with no space to breathe, move, explore, or experience. A conflict emerges between [staying and fitting in, on the one side, and escaping and being alone, on the other].”

“True community,” Vennard offers, “offers another alternative to its members, the possibility of ‘belonging’ rather than ‘fitting in.’ Community welcomes the seeker and is open to individual differences. Community asks its members to bring their own unique gifts for the good of the community and provides freedom for individual expression. Community expects personal responsibility, creativity, and accountability

from its members, which can lead to disagreement and dissension. Belonging to a community can be difficult as well as rewarding.”

IV.

Which of these, a collective or a community, do you think Paul was after, when he wrote, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think...” (I would add “not to think of yourself any *less* than you ought to think.”) “But to think with sober judgment, each according to the faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually, we are members of one another.” As you hear that verse again, pay attention to God’s voice and the stirrings of your own soul. What word or phrase stands out to you? “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually, we are members of one another.” What word or phrase that spoke to you?

Now, listen to these words, the final words in our lection today and ask yourself the question, “What gift is God calling me to share with this, my community of faith?” “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

Listen to the words again. What word or phrase comes to you to describe the gift you are being called by God to share? It may be a word Paul uses, and it may be another word prompted by Paul’s words:

“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: “prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” What word or phrase came to you?

I thank God for the gifts of grace that are so apparent in this place. I thank God for this congregation, for who God has called us to be and for who God is calling us to be. I thank God that Christians “don’t come by themselves,” but that we are called to form communities where different gifts may be discerned, where individuals are honored, and where we can nurture vital life by offering living sacrifices, our bodies themselves, for this is our spiritual worship: showing up for each other and listening together for the voice of God, discerning what kind of people God is calling us to be. Amen.