

“Do Not Be Conformed - Be Transformed”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
August 27, 2017

Romans 12: 1-8

There were a lot of great things about the Community Picnic yesterday. The first one was the weather. After a stormy, rainy day one year ago, we could not have asked for a more perfect day. Sunny, clear skies, and temperatures in the low-80s - in late-August, nonetheless! It was wonderful to be outside and not have to worry about the weather.

The second great thing was all the people who came. We saw familiar faces and faces we had never seen before. We met people from here in the community, and friends and family who came from a great distance. We had folks who drove in from around the city, and we had lots of people who walked here from the neighborhood. We saw all varieties of ages, races, and backgrounds. And we had wonderful special guests to entertain us, including a DJ, and Boomer from the Pacers. It was great to see all kinds of people here, having fun, being fed, and sharing in fellowship.

For me, though, probably the best thing about yesterday's Community Picnic was watching all of you in action. To see women, men, and youth from our church welcoming our guests, playing with their children, feeding them, talking to them, inviting them to come back - it was heart-warming, to say the least. I don't know the total number of people from our church who was involved in the planning, hosting, and implementing of the picnic, but it had to be between 50-75 people. As one person said, "I can't tell you how moving it is to see so many from our church come out to help and welcome our neighbors."

As I witnessed you living out your calling as an Open. Caring. Community, I could not help but be a witness to what we have heard from Paul's Letter to the Romans today. As I saw Pam Herman and others showing adults and children how to crochet mats out of plastic bags, to be given to the homeless, I witnessed gift of teaching. As I saw Kit Swigart, Sue Hartman, Rachel Emery, Diane Whitaker, Mary Carter, Nancy Orme, Sandy Jordan and others taking orders and serving our guests their lunch, I witnessed the gift of generosity. As I saw Karen Doty, Kim Grant, Lisa Crismore, Julie Pratt, and others mingle and get to know the people who came, I witnessed the gift of compassion and cheerfulness. As I saw all of our youth playing with the children from our community in the bounce house and water games and just having fun in a safe environment, I witnessed the gift of exhortation. And as I saw all of you serving in capacities both out front and behind the scenes, I witnessed the gift of leadership. It was humbling and awe-inspiring,

because each of you had a gift to share, and recognized the giftedness of one another through God's grace.

Yesterday was a blessing. Yesterday was an incredible joy for all of us who were here. Yesterday was also an example of how we can be transformed as members of the Body of Christ when we don't see our gifts through self-centered eyes, but through the lens of being part of the community of faith.

Seeking to be transformed as disciples speaks to Paul's message in his letter to the Romans. As Paul addresses the church in Rome, he has reached a point where he wants to emphasize the "how" of the faith, now that he has explained the "who, what, where, and why." How are you to live as children of the living God? "By presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God . . . [not to be] conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you might discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect" (12:1-2).

He goes on to say that to live in community as the church, we must recognize that we cannot live the faith on our own, or try to accomplish our goals single-handedly. We must work together in order to do the will of God. "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 one of another" (12:4-5). The gifts we each have are unique and they are interdependent on one another in order to function to their fullest potential: the teacher who teaches, the exhorter who encourages others, the giver who is generous, the compassionate who comforts the suffering.

Take it a step further, and Paul's message speaks even broader than the confines of the church. The technician who repairs a broken power line, the nurse who provides medical care in the emergency room, the retiree who tutors a young child after school, the janitor who keeps litter from maligning God's green earth, the politician who crusades for health care for the poorest of society, the road construction crew who provides transportation where there once was none. Our culture does not encourage it, does not emphasize it, does not acknowledge the fact that as the human race we are truly interdependent on one another's gifts and abilities, in the same way Paul preached that the Body of Christ is based on community, not individualism.

Paul uses language in the beginning of this passage that stresses the giving up for God of our very selves. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." To be a member of the Body of Christ means to offer all which you have - time, talents, resources, your very body - as an offering of thanksgiving for God's goodness to you. It is language that is familiar in the Christian context, for as Jesus taught and showed us, life itself is a gift given by God, and everything that we do is done in gratitude for that gift.

To offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God means you're willing to do whatever you feel called to do, but with the full intention to work together in community as one of the body's members. And whenever you make that sacrifice, you experience a greater reward than anything you can imagine: to see a child whom you mentored graduate from college; to see a family back on their feet after helping to build their home; to receive a note of compassion in times of grief from someone you comforted years ago. Your sacrifice never goes unnoticed, and your reward will truly be splendid, indeed.

I would hope that that would be the example we all set for one another and for visitors who come to our church. That when we are asked to share our gifts, we don't think first about how it would be a burden on us, but instead how sharing that gift is our way of thanking those who came before us and shared their gifts with us. When we are asked to teach children or adults, will we remember those who taught and mentored us in the faith? When we are asked to serve as an elder, a deacon, or a trustee, will we remember those who were leaders for us as a church in our past, to help nurture the faith for us today? When we are asked to do something outside of our comfort zone, will we remember those who likely did things outside of their comfort zones for us, so that we might feel connected to the Body of Christ?

How will we respond when we are asked to share our gifts in particular ways? How will we be transformed through the grace of God – as individuals, as communities, as the Body of Christ? What are we willing to do to grow spiritually as disciples of Jesus Christ?

I have to say, though, that the phrase that has continually stuck in my craw this week from this passage is: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed . . .” I actually heard that scripture read last Sunday afternoon. It was at Second Presbyterian Church, which hosted a Multifaith Service of Prayer for the Indianapolis Community, in the wake of Charlottesville and ongoing unrest throughout our country. It was a service that included Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders of our city. And I can tell you, it was exactly what I needed spiritually at that moment in time.

“Do not be conformed to this world.” It feels to me as if we have allowed ourselves to be incredibly conformed to this world – this world of division, this world of hate, this world of spewing our views on social media with no personal accountability. We have found comfort and safety in the groups who look like us, who think like us, and who then attack those who are different the way we secretly would like them to be attacked. We have become so conformed to this world that we have even become numb to it.

When we become conformed to this world, we lose sight of who we are as children of God, and what God calls us to be as disciples of his Son. When we become conformed to this world, we become stingy with

our generosity, envious of others' gifts, think only of ourselves, and forget that our collective future as the human race is dependent on one another.

We must be transformed. We must be transformed - by the renewing of our minds, by the transformation of our hearts, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We must be transformed, for it is only then that we will know truly what is God's will - what is good and acceptable and perfect. What has been happening in our world is not good or acceptable or perfect. We must be transformed.

And it begins with events like yesterday. It begins with us stepping out of our comfort zone and saying to our neighbors, "Welcome - we are glad you are here." No matter who they are, no matter what they look like, no matter how different they are than us. Yesterday was not about sound bites or blog posts or keeping to ourselves in our own ideological encampments. Yesterday was not about being conformed to the world's ways. Yesterday was about being agents of transformation, giving the world a glimpse of what God yearns to see.

I cannot tell you how proud I am to be your pastor. Let's continue to be agents of transformation - so that everyone might know what is good and acceptable and perfect in God's eyes.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.