

Transformed Nonconformists

Peter JB Carman
Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York
October 11, 2015

Reading: Romans 12:1-18

This morning's scripture reading, from the Apostle Paul, was chosen by Larry Phillips for its first two verses, to mark forty years of ministry, on the day we are honoring him with the title of Pastor Emeritus. It is one of two passages he "relies on". "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, 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 can discern what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable and perfect (whole)." The other passage Larry named is the first half of the tenth verse of Psalm 49:6, "Be still, and know that I am God."

I'd like to focus first and foremost on the passage from Romans, and what follows those first two verses. A daring passage! It points us to the task of reclaiming Christian faith as a radical alternative to status quo politics, status quo social norms, status quo consumerism and status quo spirituality. If we were to sum up the twelfth chapter of the letter to the Romans in two words, they might be: Revolutionary Thinking.

Paul, that unauthorized apostle, invites each of us to dare being what Martin Luther King Jr. half a century ago referred to in a sermon as a "Transformed Nonconformist." Wrote King: "We as Christians are commanded to live differently. We are called to be people of conviction and not conformity, people of moral nobility and not social respectability. We are called to a higher loyalty, to a more excellent way."

Don't let your minds and hearts be shaped by the assumptions, the traditions, the practices of this age, Paul encouraged them, almost two thousand years ago. Don't just try to fit in. Be "transformed by the renewal of your mind". For Paul this meant radical steps! First he dared people to come together in communities who share and share alike, each bringing unique gifts, trusting others to use their gifts too! That would mean giving up mistrust, giving up the need to control the outcomes. It would mean daring to be part of a movement bigger than our own rugged individualisms!

Paul then summoned his readers to a second revolutionary way of thinking. He planted seeds of Jesus' take on nonviolent social transformation. We all live in a world which is a seemingly endless spiral of violence and injustice. It is up to each of us, Paul proposed as Jesus had before him, to show a more excellent way. He then offered teachings that remains, alongside the Sermon on the Mount, a manifesto for revolutionary thinking and revolutionary living-- a revolution that begins with the heart and reaches all the way through family to church to neighborhood to the business of nations.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Give up competing with your neighbors—try simplicity and humility on for size. Give up vengeance! No more getting even. Try a different way! And finally, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Someone needs to interrupt the cycle. And that would be thee and me.

Revolutionary thinking? Truths that have been repeated for years without conviction, recited but rarely tried, become as boring as those who parrot them. We have for two thousand years been reciting the summons to live by the law of love rather than vengeance, solidarity rather than competition, simplicity rather than self-seeking arrogance! But talk is cheap. People are used to even the Church talking that way, and then going and acting another. Why would they listen? And yet ancient truth may spring forth fresh. These words are from C. S Lewis: “Even in literature and art, no [one] who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.”

The challenge we face is: is how do we personally follow the trajectory of folk like Martin Luther King Jr., or Archbishop Romero, or Dorothy Day, or the other scattered witnesses across the centuries, including our own Larry Phillips? How shall we talk and walk and live this journey, standing with those who suffer, speaking out when silence reigns? How do we manage to re-write the book on Christianity?

We need to allow the message of the revolutionary Christ to capture our imaginations. Imagine what our personal worlds will look like, if we reverse the usual cycles; break out of the usual back and forth; set ourselves free from the desires to compete and rise and succeed. And for those who are used to suffering quietly, passively—the questions are even more challenging! What does it mean to be creatively nonviolent instead of being doormats for violence and injustice?

“Be still and know that I am God.” It turns out that the words from the Psalm Larry chose for today are relevant to the task. In order to be open to new possibilities we must still ourselves and our sense of impossibility sufficiently to allow a fresh imagining to take hold, a fresh way of seeing from a new angle. We must still the troubled naysaying of our own hearts if we are to allow God’s transformation to begin. “Be still and know that I am God.” Allow the soul to be transformed by the renewal of the mind! Once we have begun imagining, have been stirred by the vision, then start to see things afresh in our own lives—starting small in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our church. Try it out, still the soul; start to ask the questions; open yourself to the renewal internally and close at hand. Try looking at your children in a new way! See your parents with fresh eyes. Acknowledge the places of pain...dare to still the old stuff and start a new story, rather than continuing the endless cycle of the old scripts! Insist on courage. Abandon cynicism.

Let us not underestimate the revolutionary potential and power of the message of Christ’s love. We need not be overwhelmed by the evil of our own times, but rather start trusting again that within God and humanity there lies the possibility of goodness. Trusting that is risky. Living it is riskier. Failing to try it is, however, a self-fulfilling defeat.

The world today is in need of folk who are willing to risk revolutionary thinking of the kind to which Christ invites us. In the streets of Ankara, Turkey where bombs just recently snuffed out demonstrators for peace; in the neighborhoods of Schenectady: it is urgent that we reclaim the revolutionary call of the gospel of love and justice! It has to start with imagination. It has to start with some prayer! It has to start with some vision and some courage. It has to start with the transformation of hearts and the renewal of minds.

May God grant us all these, beginning with a fresh glimpse of our own place in the movement. As we today celebrate the persistent and faithful witness of this congregation and one pastor over the course of three decades, may we renew our commitment to nonconformity and transformation. There is a different kind of revolution coming! This one starts small, starts within...starts here.