

Romans 12:1-8

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Elder Nicholas Hurley

Sunday, April 23, 2020

Transforming Goodness

Well, good morning again, friends. I trust you are staying as cool and healthy as possible, though I know that that combination of little blessings can be awfully hard to come by these days. It was already a strange and stressful time we've been living in, and this week has only made it even stranger and more stressful.

Before I start digging into these texts we've read this morning, I would like to acknowledge a few things. First off, this is the first time I'm preaching to you all on zoom. And so, while I trust in our wonderful worship coordinators, and in my internet connection, I want to apologize in advance if things go horribly, horribly wrong and I disappear mid-sermon.

Second, and more importantly, this text I'm preaching from today, particularly the opening part about not being conformed to this world, has been used to justify an awful lot of harmful theology, especially towards our siblings who are LGBTQ, and to a much lesser extent those of us who do our best to affirm them for who they are. I feel it's important to name this, because I want anyone listening to know that who you are and who you love has nothing to do with being conformed to the world, and anyone who tells you otherwise is wrong. God loves you, full stop. If that is all you take from my sermon today, that this passage is not telling you you're wrong for just being who you are, then that is a good and holy thing for you to hear today. But I do want to talk about being conformed to the world and the transforming of our minds, because I think this passage has real meaning for us, especially so today when the world is both metaphorically and literally on fire around us.

In an episode from his podcast "The Way of Love", Bishop Michael Curry of the Episcopal Church said

There is a pattern of accommodating and becoming comfortable with the way things are. [...] When the church gets too cozy with the culture and the way things are, you have to ask yourself the question Who is your Lord? Who's really God? Who's really in charge? [...] Who is in charge of your life and the life of the church? Is it Jesus of Nazareth or is it the culture in which you are embedded? If it is the culture then you are not following Jesus.

I think, church, that this more expansive rephrasing of Paul's exhortation to not be conformed to the world speaks deeply into our own context. The word

“comfortable” there, I think, is quite appropriate, because it’s very rare (if ever) that we end up conformed to worldly things because of a threat, or even because of a conscious choice. The world is, quite frankly friends, a very comfortable and easy place to be. Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that we should be abandoning all we have and moving to monasteries in the desert carved out of the mountains, that’s not the kind of comfort I’m talking about. Because Paul doesn’t say “be transformed by the abandoning of your stuff”, although if you’re like me, you could probably stand to do a little purging. No, he says “be transformed by the renewing of your minds”. We need to radically reshape the way we think about our world, and particularly ourselves. We need to interrogate the things we have thought of as “good and acceptable and perfect” to see if they really are.

I suspect that each one of us has built up some set of things in our lives that we see as “good and acceptable and perfect”. This may include, if not our particular job, then our line of work; it may include our political opinions; it may include our favourite food; it may even include some part of our own internal lives that we are particularly satisfied with. I know I certainly have a set of things in my life that I see as wholly good — Meredith’s cheesecake comes to mind. But there are other things, too. Other things that at least feel as though they are integral to who I am. As Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber said in an episode of her podcast “The Confessional”

We tell ourselves stories about who we are and what we deserve and what the events of our lives mean, and then we commit this all to memory and we repeat it to ourselves and others, over and over, as if it’s fact. We assume there is a period where really, quite often, there is a comma.

I think that this habit of ours, this habit that we all have as human beings of making things integral to us that are quite frankly incidental, presents a certain danger. It’s certainly dangerous when we tell ourselves stories about how something we have done is bad and end up internalising that as a part of ourselves. If you take nothing else from this sermon, then take this — telling ourselves stories about how bad we are, or how we are failures, is dangerous and harmful, and stands in direct contradiction to the *imago dei* that resides in each and every one of us. It’s very important that you all understand this so that you can properly engage with what I’m about to say next, because I would suggest, that there is also a danger in continually telling ourselves stories about how we are good. Now, before you freak out, I’m not going to go “full Calvin” on you and start ranting about how we’re all horrible sinners and we’re irredeemable and we desperately need Jesus and blah blah blah. If I went on that rant, I’d be directly contradicting myself from just half a paragraph or so ago where I said we shouldn’t internalise an idea of ourselves as “bad”.

I would like to suggest that instead of thinking of ourselves as “good” or “bad”, we should aim for a middle ground; what Rev. Rebecca Young calls “good-ish”. She describes it as a space where we are people who are trying to be good, but we know we aren’t, not yet. We know that we still need to put in a lot of effort, and open ourselves to a whole lot of grace. When we are good-ish people who recognise that even with all the good things we do, we do still desperately need Jesus, then the moments when we are faced with the truth that we have made a mistake, we have gotten and continue to get things wrong, well then those moments aren’t nearly as shocking.

I think, friends, that when we tell ourselves over and over again that we’re good people, that we have always done the right thing in this or that part of our lives, we have run afoul of Paul’s admonition not to “think[...] more highly of [our]selves than [we] ought” We tell ourselves these stories about how good we are, and thus by extension the things we are involved with are. We convince ourselves that our desire to keep people connected is wholly good, which makes the company we work for good, even if that company sells that information to governments who want to keep tabs on political dissidents. We convince ourselves that our desire for worldly safety is wholly good, and because of that a system of policing that regularly murders BIPOC folx is good. In effect, we start identifying our own flesh and blood with the powers and principalities that Paul talks about in his letter to the Ephesians. And so, when the powers and principalities rightly come under critique, our own flesh and blood feels as though it’s being attacked. When we’re confronted with evidence that we maybe got something wrong, it flies in the face of that “internalised goodness” that we’ve built up for ourselves, which can cause a lot of pain and suffering for us as we wrestle with that dissonance. And not only does that harm us as individuals, it begins to tear us apart as the Body of Christ, because of the strong desire to cleave to the worldly things that are comfortable instead of facing into the need for a radical transformation.

One of the clearest instances of my own internalised goodness being confronted with a reality that says otherwise came when I was at the DisGRACE conference in 2016. After Dr. Anthea Butler’s keynote (which was, by all accounts, quite intense), as most of the attendees were filing out of the auditorium, those of us from Stone were sitting around processing, and seemingly out of nowhere, I started crying. Our little group consoled me, and I collected myself, and I kind of thought that was the end of it. But when I came back home a few days later, Meredith said I seemed like a different person. When she said that, I kind of scoffed it off... I didn’t feel like a different person, not really.

As I've looked back on that moment, though, in light of all the recent events that have transpired in the world, I've had a realisation about that time, about why I cried, and about why Meredith said I seemed like a different person. My tears were tears of mourning. I was mourning the person I had convinced myself I was, and so in a very real way, Meredith was right — I had come home a different person. The Nicholas I thought I knew had in a sense died in that auditorium at Montreat, and a different Nicholas — still me, yes, but also transformed and renewed — came home in his place.

I tell you this because I see in this moment, that we at Stone, and in the wider PC(USA), and indeed in the church in America as a whole, are being confronted head-on with the realisation that we have in some ways conformed to the world... we have been “too cozy with the way things are” as Bishop Curry put it. We are being confronted with the truth that we have continued to harm BIPOC folk, no matter how much work we've done against racism, no matter what the history of our congregation is in relation to the civil rights movement. That sense of “goodness” that we have internalised is being challenged and upended, and it's tempting to start thinking that if our sense of “goodness” has been wrong, then perhaps we are “bad”. But we're not. Well, if we aren't good, but we aren't bad, what are we? We're good-ish.

Now, I grant you, this is much, much harder when it feels like this renewing of our minds is being forced upon us, as I suspect it feels for a lot of you right now, because it feels that way for me, too. But as we are going through this moment of renewing our minds, we have a choice. We can fight it tooth and nail, fight to keep our own self-image intact at all costs. Or, we can let that old self-image go; we can let that self-image die peacefully, which I admit can feel incredibly scary.

I suppose it's a good thing, then, that we are Christians. It's a good thing that we believe that 2000 years ago, on a Sunday morning, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been put to death on a cross and buried in a tomb, got up and walked out, proclaiming God's victory over all forms of death. We know, friends, that as scary as death may be, there is abundant life waiting for us on the other side, and that holds true for the death of our self-image, as well. We know that God promises us this regardless of how good-ish we may be right now. In our gospel reading, Jesus says to Peter — the same Peter who Jesus knows will deny him three times come Maundy Thursday — Jesus says that he will build his church upon that rock, that petra. Now, if Jesus can take someone who outright denies Him and make him into a foundational building block of the church, then surely Jesus can and will extend the same grace to us. My friends, we are being given a grace-filled opportunity to see that our old self-image is passing away, and in its place is the resurrected Body of Christ in all its diverse glory — BIPOC, Latinx, European-American, LGBTQ, straight, and everything in

between and outside those labels. Let us not be afraid friends, but instead live into this holy moment of death and resurrection.

In the name of the triune God; Parent, Word, and Holy Spirit. Amen.