

## **CONFORMITY, NON-CONFORMITY AND TRANSFORMATION**

*Sermon for Pentecost 12A-Rom. 12:1-8*

LPC, 8/27/17

Do you have a positive or a negative reaction when you hear the word “conformity”? Conformity tends to be lower on the list as a social value in America than it does in some other societies, like, say, North Korea, where conformity is valued very highly.

At the same time Americans expect a certain amount of conformity. Colin Kaepernick’s failure to conform to the convention of standing for the national anthem has met with very widespread criticism, for example. And there’s a suburb in Pittsburgh that is struggling right now with an influx of Roma (also known as gypsy) immigrants who do not conform to traditional suburban practices. Neighbors are complaining because the Roma keep livestock and allow their children to urinate in the front yard. So a certain amount of conformity is expected in our society.

Personally, I have some baggage about conformity. In the first place I come from a family that places value on not conforming when conscience demands. I grew up on stories of how my grandfather, a coal miner, feeling strongly about one particular issue, declined to conform to the expectations of his union, despite threats to his person and his family.

Also, I grew up in a time and place, the Boston suburbs in the 1960’s, where conformity was almost a dirty word. Non-conformity was the rallying cry of the hippie movement. It’s interesting, however, that non-conformists who band together seem quickly to adopt their own conventions to which to conform, like the long hair, the love beads and the tie-dye which characterized hippies, not to mention the drugs.

However, there does seem to be a correlation between creativity and non-conformity, and creativity is usually a good thing. You must have seen the bumper sticker that reads, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” There’s some truth to that sentiment. We know, for example, that recognized geniuses like Albert Einstein and Bill Gates did not succeed so well in conventional school situations, where a certain amount of conformity is expected for the good of the many.

I think I’ve made my point that conformity is an ambiguous thing, with good and not-so-good aspects. To conform or not to conform? That is a question that will arise for the conscientious and morally conscious individual from time to time, and the answer is not always clear-cut.

The issue of whether to conform and how much continues in our society. Consider the balance between freedom and conformity in dealing with the implications of a society based on free expression, as when we deal with groups like Neo-Nazis that do not conform to prevailing ideas of justice and equality.

Religion implies some sort of conformity. Over the past few decades there is evidence that more people are deciding not to conform to conventional religion. Religions have creeds, confessions, statements of faith, and methods of governance to which to conform. In the

Episcopal Church we have our Prayer Book, our Constitution and Canons, our 39 Articles and our Chicago Quadrilateral. (If you want to know more about those last two and how they define Episcopalianism, check the back of your Prayer Book.) Religion defines itself in ways like these. Without conformity to these definitions, the words “Christian” and “Episcopalian” would have no meaning. My point is that if you are going to call yourself “Episcopalian” or “Christian” you are buying into some degree of conformity.

Yet here in his letter to the Romans, St. Paul is telling his audience *not* to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed. This bears some unpacking.

Obviously St. Paul here means for the Romans to place heavenly values over social conventions. But notice that he does not say, “Do not be conformed to this world, but rather be conformed to heaven.” He would probably have agreed with that sentiment, but that is not what he says here. The contrast Paul draws here is not between the nouns, world and heaven, but between the verbs, conforming and transforming.

Paul indicates that conformity to Christian beliefs or practices is not an end in itself. Transformation is the ultimate goal for Christians. This may be a fine point, but it does make a difference in how Christians live out their faith. Transformation rather than conformity is the emphasis for Christian practice.

In the first place, conformity is a state of being, whereas transformation is a state of becoming. Christians are by definition in a state of becoming. In other words, we are never done in this life. We don’t graduate Sunday School, or be baptized, or reach a certain level of knowledge, or perform some great act, and say, “There, I’ve done it. I’ve succeeded as a Christian.” A Christian is always in a process of becoming. You see this in the lives of the great saints. They are always in a state of becoming. This calls for some humility.

Secondly, in conformity, the human being is the actor. In transformation, God is the actor. You can make yourself conform, but only God can transform you. This too calls for humility. It also calls for continual openness and availability to God, to the point of self-sacrifice, being a “living sacrifice,” as Paul puts it. This openness and availability to God is likewise typical of the great saints.

What might this openness and availability to God look like for us? For one thing it means a great deal of prayer... with prayer being less as a laundry list of requests for God to fulfill and more spending time with God and saying, “Here I am. Send me.”

Conformity is not the most important part of being a Christian. But neither is non-conformity. Transformation is our goal, but only God can effect our transformation. Only God can plant the seed. But we can prepare the soil, make it soft and receptive so that the seed of God’s transformation, which we have been told is abundant and ubiquitous, has a chance to take root in us. This is what it means to be a living sacrifice: saying to God, “Here I am. Send me.”