

## A Church of Interest

**Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”**

Many times, the Apostle Paul is portrayed to us as a complex and sometimes troubling individual. As a Jew, Paul was at odds with the popular culture of the Mediterranean world. His belief in one God would set him apart. Many ancient writers did not have kind words to say or write about the Jews. Their belief in one God made them square pegs in the round cultural holes of the Geo-Roman world.

When all is said and done, Paul holds up a mirror of God’s love. His letter to the Christian sisters and brothers in Roman which was the seat of the Roman Empire, the Eternal City lays out Paul’s instructions for how one is to live the Christian life while living in ‘shark infested waters.’ I say shark infested waters because Christianity was not a state sanctioned religion at the time. Paul has a mountaintop faith that calls us to scale the spiritual heights of God’s love for us and in us. Paul’s points us to the highest hope for Christian living.

So, in these days when it feels like we are walking through the shadow of the valley of death- with loss of George Floyd, Justice Ginsburg, John Lewis, Chadwick Boseman, and the over 220,189 people who have died due to the COVID virus, **Paul** reminds us that neither death, nor life, no angels, not rulers, not things present, nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will separate us from the love of God.

When it seems like things are going from bad to worst- from the promises of a vaccine, to the hate mongers who are threatening voters, to name-calling coming from the highest level of our government, to the

500 plus children who were separated from their parents at the US boarder and now the government is unable to reunite them with their parents and or family members, fake news, Paul encourages us and reminds us that all things works for the good, of those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose. Yes, there is a Divine Plan. God is always at work.

Paul has laid out a perfect plan for how we are to live the Christian life.

And then we come to Paul's words in the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Romans.

Challenging words for us. **“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”**

Do not be conformed to this world, Christian! The is tough advice because we all want to fit in and be part of the in crowd. Our culture has unconsciously conditioned our minds and feet to move to the beat of the status quo and we our behavior is rewarded by staying on the path.

When it comes to dealing with racial concerns voices and forces urge many to choose the path of least resistance, privilege, and comfort. For many of our Christian white sisters and brothers it comfortable to remind in one's own echo chamber where one's assumptions and beliefs can remain unchallenged and supported.

Earlier this summer, thousands of Americans poured into the streets in anger and frustration over the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Tylor and Ahmadu Arbery. Their killings at the hands of police and White vigilantes sparked an outcry against racism not seen in this country since the peak of the civil rights movement of the 60's. Books such as White Fragility and How to be an Antiracist flew off the bookshelves. More of

my White sisters and brothers seemed willing to admit that deep-seated, structural racism did not end with the banishment of Jim Crow. Structural racism is woven into every fabric of our society from health care to education and even the church.

But where are the crowds now? A recent Pew Research study showed that the white support for the Black Lives Matter movement has slipped over the past months. Support dropped from 60 percent in June down to 45 this month.

Many people have had the privilege of going back to their normal lives and routines, while our black and brown sisters and brothers do not have the luxury to leave the front lines of the march because racism American's original sin continues to rain down on all of us. And even though the crowds are gone, there is a sense of urgency to stop the systematic murder of Black people by the police brutality. No longer are we willing to sit back and pretend it did not happen.

Paul's instruction **not to conform** to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect, is a challenge anytime but particularly now in this season of racial unrest.

On Reformation Sunday-more than ever the world needs a revolutionary Christianity. Martin Luther sparked a reformation that forever split the Christian Church and his name sake The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968 called for the Church to inspire the world through a genuine radical revolution of human values that would decry the spirit of white supremacy. He called for the unconditional love of all people. He called upon the Church to look "uneasily" and "with" righteous indignation on the sin of racism.

For such a time as this, **if** the Church of God is to be the voice of resistance, hope, and reconciliation it will not be caught up in conformity. God calls the Church out of the crowd and calls it to be accountable before God for the proclamation of the Good News to all people. The Church of God must be uncomfortable in the world to fulfill its mandate. It must be countercultural, multicultural, and willing to get into good trouble, necessary trouble. And it must break its silence/ around race.

And when it does, The Church will be on the “no fly list” at the airport. This will be a CHURCH of INTEREST.

Paul’s words are not easy to digest but **necessary**. Because through our Baptism we are “made new” in Christ Jesus. We can no longer be caught up in disregarding the color of the skin that each of us are wrapped in. We should not be afraid to see the beautiful shades of color that God has created.

I believe that we can live together **only** as we see in each other the image of God-holy, precious, burdened with amazing potential. Each of us was counted by Jesus Christ as worth a cross on Calvary. That is the depth of God’s love for us.

The work that we are doing in our congregation to dismantle racism is exciting, difficult, and commendable. Through conversations, trainings, readings, prayer we are starting on a journey to dismantle racism. And the goal of this work is to enhance our Christian fellowship in our church no matter your skin color.

This work that we are doing through Grace Speaks invites all of us-black, white, brown, yellow, red, mixed, to stretch our faith and spiritual

muscles so that we can grow in God's spirit and grace and be all God wants us to be.

We are getting into the center of racism as a predominately White congregation as a Christian endeavor. And by getting into the center of things, there is an opportunity to become mindful of how far away from the center most people live. By being in the center of things, there is an opportunity for truth-telling, soul searching, confronting history, acknowledging racist structure, and creating a common language to talk about racism, white privileged as a Christian endeavor. We believe that by authentically engaging this work, confession, healing, and redemption will be possible. And with God's help ACTION.

The Good News this morning is that God has set us on a path so that we Old South will be on the "No Fly list" .... A path so that we can be a Church of Interest. We are preparing ourselves to be engaged with God on a lifelong journey of learning about ourselves and learning how to trust God in every situation of our life.

The gifts of the Spirit, joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control hold the promise of being treasured resources for Christians growth in our very lives. This journey will be riddled with risk and challenges. God did not promise to take away our fears, anxieties, and frustration. What God promised to be with us in all situations of our life.

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And the Good News this morning is that all change is risky and difficult. And there is a willingness to pour our new wine into new contains that we will create together.

Our Christian journey life is riddled with risk and challenges. God did not promise to take away our fears, anxieties, and frustration. What God promised to be with us in all situations of our life.