

Material World
Romans 12:1-8
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
August 27, 2017
Rev. Glen Bell

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed, that you may demonstrate God's will in your everyday lives.

Anne and I were surrounded by history during our week in Paris. We rented a small apartment in the Marais. The building was over one hundred years old. I noticed a small plaque up on the wall.

Our building had been the home of Yvette Feulliet. Yvette and her sister Henriette were members of the French resistance during the German occupation of World War II. Henriette was arrested in October, 1940, and Yvette a year and a half later. Yvette was sent to Auschwitz, where she died of typhus. She was twenty-two years old.

Yvette Feulliet stood against the Nazis at the cost of her life.

Just a few buildings down from our apartment is the site of the former Goldenberg Restaurant. Thirty-five years ago this month Abu Nidal bombed the café, then rushed in, firing machine guns. Six people were killed, including Ann Van Zanten, of the Chicago Historical Society. Her husband, a professor at Northwestern University, was injured.

The crime of those killed and injured? They were eating at a Jewish restaurant, in a Jewish neighborhood.

Anti-Semitism, discrimination, bigotry killed them, and those evils are still alive and well.

Do not be conformed to this world, Paul writes the church. Do not give in, even in the slightest, to these evils. Do not simply shake your head at the latest headline. Present your very bodies as a living sacrifice. This is your spiritual life and worship.

Our devotion to Scripture invites us to this kind of unity, this kind of wholeness as persons. We are not to dichotomize ourselves, not to separate ourselves into two people: one who worships and listens to God's Word on Sunday, and another who lives as a teacher or attorney or shopkeeper or pastor Monday through Friday, keeping one's head down.

No, we are invited to dedicate all our stuff – our physical selves, our flesh and blood, our time and energy, the nitty-gritty of our lives, our bodies – to Jesus Christ our Savior. We are invited to advocacy, commitment and love. Love for our neighbor. Love for the stranger. Love for the one different from us. Love for the one difficult to love, whose only gift for us in the moment is misunderstanding or anger or opposition or bitterness.

This means we Christians do not have the luxury of silence and the illusion of "neutrality." We cannot keep our heads down, and "go along to get along." No, Elie Weisel, the Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor, put it well. "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

As we are transformed into day-to-day Christ followers, we become the voice for the voiceless. We stand against bigotry and discrimination. We reject conformity and stand here under the cross, before the pulpit, font and table, opening ourselves to transformation.

This month would have been the one hundredth birthday of Oscar Romero, the Catholic archbishop of San Salvador. Oscar Romero was a champion of the poor, those who were suffering during the brutal civil war there. He was assassinated in the middle of worship one evening, standing at the altar, killed by a government death squad.

He had agreed to say a requiem mass that evening for the mother of a friend. Here is what he said in his final sermon. "I think we should not only pray this evening for the eternal rest of our dear Dona Sarita, but . . . we should take to ourselves her message . . . that every Christian ought to want to live intensely.

“Many do not understand,” he added. “They think Christianity should not be involved in such things,” in the physical and material everyday world. “One must not love oneself so much,” he said, “as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life. . . . Those who out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others will live, like the grain of wheat that [first] dies.” He finished his sermon this way. “Brothers and sisters, let us [live our lives]. . . with a spirit of giving and of sacrifice. Let us all do what we can.”

This kind of commitment, this discipline in daily life is difficult for you and me. To embrace this transformation, to present ourselves as a sacrifice, to live as one body in Christ, we must find the courage to open our hearts, to make ourselves vulnerable, to place ourselves last, not first, and to speak out for others in Christ’s name.

This is difficult. Sue Washburn is the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania. She believes that in this spirit we – you and I - can share good news, that we – you and I - can be evangelists. “If we talk about Jesus with enthusiasm that we talk about our favorite restaurants or sports teams,” she writes, “if we listen to and engage with people’s questions and feelings about God and church, together we may stir something new in others and ourselves.

“People over thirty who long for Jesus may be radically skeptical of the church or they may have been hurt by a few people in a congregation. When people find out I’m a pastor,” she continues, “they ask all kinds of questions and lodge all kinds of complaints. My most common words to hairdressers, waiters and strangers on airplanes are ‘I’m sorry.’ I’m sorry that the church hurt you. I’m sorry the church betrayed you. I’m sorry the church abandoned you. I hear their hurt and try to offer healing without becoming defensive.

“And in a world where many people under thirty haven’t been in church or Sunday school, we can’t expect them to understand what happens inside a church. We must learn to trust that God is working in the people we meet wherever they are – in bars and on soccer fields, in skepticism and questions and maybe even in their funky theology. If they accept an invitation to come through our doors, we should trust that God will form them – and us – into something new.”

To be transformed, to present ourselves, to live intensely means to be involved as Christ followers in our physical and material everyday world, Monday through Friday. God will form us into something new.

Such a life is a deep challenge. We each face our own battles. We each carry our own pain. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said it well, “Only by opening our heart can we hope to transform and redeem the pain we carry. As we unburden ourselves, we are less likely to act out our suffering on others, and we move closer to realizing God’s dream for us.”

Jill Duffield is the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook. She was our Faith Focus Weekend speaker here six months ago. Jill lives in Charlottesville.

Two weeks ago she made a new friend there, a young woman who demonstrates all of the exhortations that we hear at the close of this scripture lesson from Romans 12. The Apostle Paul invites us to minister and teach, to encourage and give, to lead - and *to demonstrate compassion*. He invites us to do this every day, as people presenting ourselves to Christ and being transformed.

Here’s what Jill shares. “At one point on Sunday, August 12 [in Charlottesville], I found myself standing beside a young, African-American woman from ‘over the mountain’ about forty miles west of Charlottesville. She is an Episcopal priest who’d heard and heeded the call to come support area faith leaders. As we talked, we could hear chants coming from the park where the Unite the Right rally was to be held at noon.

“They grew louder and angrier, audible even over the din of helicopters hovering overhead. The chant that drifted into the Methodist church parking lot was filled with expletives and invectives.

“My new friend shook her head and looked down. Then she looked up and said something I didn’t expect. She said, ‘There are a lot of hurting people over there.’

“She added: ‘There is no joy over in that park. They are hurting.’

“Her grace caught me off guard,” Jill added. “I think my expression revealed my surprise because she continued, ‘We have to remember that they are hurting, because we need to be the church for them too. If we forget that, we’ve lost everything that really matters.’”

You and I don’t need to fear Nazis or terrorists or death squads. Oh, they are real, all right. But we don’t need to fear them, because God gives us the strength to present our bodies in love and compassion, working for peace and justice. You and I don’t need to fear the misunderstanding of neighbors or friends, because we open ourselves to transformation in Christ, not the conformity of agreeing with the powerful or the popular.

We are freed to live for others, to meet people just where they are hurting.

My friend, Blair Monie, is in the midst of pancreatic cancer. During his treatment, his social media posts have been filled with warmth and encouragement. A day or two ago, he reminded me of our call in Jesus Christ. He shared this quote from Phillips Brooks. “How carefully most men [and women] creep into nameless graves, while now and again one or two forget themselves into immortality.”

So brothers and sisters, let us forget ourselves. Let us refuse to be molded and conformed by this world. Let us be transformed by God. Let us live for light and love and compassion.