

“Being Transformed not Conformed”

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“Be transformed rather than conformed, by the renewing of your mind, so you can discern what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable and whole.” (Romans 12:2) In the very popular paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson puts the same verse this way: “Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you...God brings the best out of you.”

The subject matter for this 12th Sunday after Pentecost is the business of “being formed,” shaped, molded, you know, what life does to and with us. Being formed is a big topic that can send us in any number of interesting directions. Thankfully in today’s reading from St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* we find two words that will guide our thoughts. And “thoughts” is the right word. Why? Because it is the renewing of our mind that somehow activates the formation that will bring the best out in you and in me.

The first word is “transform.” The prefix *trans*—“on or to the other side of, across and beyond,” when attached to the word “formed” signifies a change, usually a big or monumental crossing or metamorphosis. Transformation is found in the disciplines of biology and medicine, chemistry and mathematics, and music and literature, business and law. For St. Paul, to be transformed is akin to being reborn, as in starting over and not looking back. The second word is “conformed.” The prefix *con*—“with or thoroughly” is essentially the the beginning, of all things communal. Like transformed, conformed is a strong word. To con-nect is to link together in order to create a relationship. A con-gregation is something we are, for there are sacred ties that bind us together in love, and yet, we have missed con-gregating for months and months.

But it is clear that Paul wants us to be transformed and not conformed, and I wonder if he may have in mind what the prefix *con* implies when used as a verb. We can be conned, swindled, manipulated by the culture around us, by people and places and things that seem to have power over us. And the way not to be an easy target for the next con is to maintain a renewed mind, which will allow us to figure out what is God’s will—what is good, pleasing and whole.

I’ve been thinking about how we can renew our mind and not get conned, and what keeps coming to me is something very practical that Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, whom I’ve followed since the late 1970s, has captured in a wonderful phrase; I’ve shared this before, but it is worth sharing it again (and again!). Rohr talks about living “on the edge of the inside,” and it seems to help me figure out what St. Paul is saying. To be transformed requires us to be close to the center, yes, an “insider,” for it is there we have access to power in its rawest form. But for transformation to accomplish anything of lasting value, it must remain at the edge of the center/inside, less we be overwhelmed, consumed. I think this is the dynamic of which Paul speaks, the ongoing struggle of being formed in the world but not completely of or solely by the

world. And this is the dynamic, the undercurrent of any thriller or Netflix series; it is what makes “the news” a 24-hour cycle, be it about politicians or popes, police officers or protesters. Insiders in danger of being taken in, potentially just another one of us on the take. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Living and staying at the edge of the inside allows for perspective, keeps us from being swallowed up, allows us a chance to keep one ear out of the echo chamber where it is so loud and raw.

This is the mystery of incarnation, a mystery that we try every year to name at Christmas, but we never fully understand. It is believed that Jesus somehow lived at the center of things, was like us in all ways, we are told, but always seems to be at the edge, with a foot just outside the chaos, conditioned (we learned that just last Sunday!) but not utterly confused or confounded by the culture of his day (we learned that, too, last Sunday!). We are all being formed—and not just during our “formative years.” Every year forms us. But Paul says, “But be not conformed but transformed by the renewing of your mind; only then will we have the chance to bring about what God wants—all that is good, acceptable, and whole. It is the invitation to resist being conformed to any way other than the way of Jesus.

Today’s gospel reading has Jesus asking Peter, “Who do people say that I am?” And Peter answers, “You are the Christ,” and Jesus says, “Happy are you for knowing what you know.” But knowing Jesus is not the same thing as following Jesus. Do not be conformed to any old way of living. Let us live as those who are being transformed, people who are attempting to resist all that is untransformed. And let us pray that God will continue to renew us—body, mind and spirit, day after day, week after week, so that we can learn how to better live from the edge of the center, insiders, yes, so that we can leverage what we know and have to get something done, but from the edge, so that we are never on the take.

I will close with a powerful yet believable story of how one woman, a Palestinian poet whom I’ve read for years, transformed a scary situation into a moment in time when God’s will was made manifest, and wholeness, not fear or chaos, had the last word. Years ago, wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, Naomi Shihab Nye heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” Well, oddly enough, Gate A-4 was the gate to which she was walking to catch a plane. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, like her grandmother wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. An official from the airport said to Naomi: “Talk to her; what is her problem. We told her that her flight was going to be late and then she started doing this.”

Naomi put her arms around the woman and quietly spoke in Arabic. The woman stopped crying and was taken aback when she heard the familiar sounds of her mother tongue. “My flight, my flight, canceled, and I have a major medical treatment tomorrow morning in El Paso....” Naomi said, “You’re fine; you’ll get there. Would you like me to call the person who was supposed to meet you?” So, they call the woman’s son, and Naomi tells him what time his mother will arrive

and assures him that she will stay with her until she arrives in El Paso. After they finish talking, Naomi calls her dad, and he speaks to the woman in Arabic and finds, of course, they have three or more mutual friends. Then she dials a couple of Palestinian authors she knows and the woman talks for about 30 minutes.

Hear it now in Naomi's words: "By now, the woman was laughing, telling others about her life, patting me, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament—the traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lonely woman from Laredo, we were all covered with the same powdered sugar and smiling. The airline broke out free beverages from coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving apple juice, and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves...such an old-country, traveling tradition... "always carry a plant," it is said; always stay rooted to something, somewhere. And I looked around the gate of late and weary ones and thought: this is the world I want to live in. The shared world....This can still happen; not everything is lost." (*Faith at Work*, Summer, 2008)

"Have thine Own way, Lord, oh, have thine Own way. You are the Potter, we are the clay. Fill with thy Spirit, till all shall see, Christ only, always, living in me." Let the people say: Amen.