

“FAITHFUL NONCONFORMITY”

Sermon preached by

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No matter what faith tradition shaped us, no matter what name of the Holy One speaks most powerfully and personally to us, no matter what political party we affiliate with—or don’t—no matter what forms of news we read or hear or receive on social media—or avoid altogether—I think we can agree that the days through which we are living are difficult. Prideful platitudes and “my way or the highway” attitudes seem to have become the country’s daily bread. Fact-based, respectful dialogue has been buried under layer upon layer of self-serving personal opinion. Distractions abound. Lack of trust in just about everything and everyone is rampant. Public interactions are saturated with innuendo and insult and it has become anybody’s guess what the truth is. Indeed, it seems generally to be considered of relatively little consequence what the truth is. Meanwhile, inequality and injustice continue to benefit the privileged few at the expense of the exploited many.

Called to speak a word of challenge and hope in the midst of this toxic atmosphere, I have found myself wrestling mightily with our summer theme of finding a way forward, and it has evoked in me question which has laid hold of me with the fierce urgency of now: What does it mean to live to live faithfully in such soul-scarring times? Like the hound of heaven, that question has pursued me more intensely in recent months than at any previous point in my lifetime. Indeed, this time in our history strikes me as a pivotal moment when people of faith are called daily to decide what values, principles, and ethics shape who we are and what we do and say.

And so, as I have been confronted with the need to make that important decision, I have sought guidance from a source beyond myself, a source infused with timeless insight. That source for me is Scripture. What really surprised me is that I have been led to words written by the apostle Paul, with whom, as a woman in ministry, I have not been the best of friends and have long had significant disagreements. Nevertheless, I have found in the 12th chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Rome deep wisdom for the living of these days.

“Do not be conformed to this world”, Paul writes, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,…” or, as pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*, paraphrases that verse: “Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. “

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What does that mean in everyday, practical terms? I think that at least part of what it means is to take a look in the mirror and be completely honest about what we see there. During my reading and study in preparation for this sermon, I had that experience when I opened my morning newspaper to a column by David Brooks and came face to face with an aspect of my own un-thinking adjustment to and participation in the inequality that has permeated the culture in which we live. What particularly caught my eye was a section in Brooks' column about “cultural signifiers”, which he described as a kind of code “that can be accessed only by those who possess rarefied information. “

“(Cultural signifiers)”, he wrote, “play on the normal human fear of humiliation and exclusion. Their chief message is ‘You are not welcome here.’” As an example, he told of taking a friend to lunch and observing that friend's obvious discomfort at a restaurant where the menu items presupposed a certain level of education (e.g. panini, arugula, burrata). He amplified

the point by noting that 80% of those who shop at Whole Foods are college graduates. His column ended with these words: “We in the educated class have created barriers to mobility that are more devastating for being invisible. The rest of America can’t name them, can’t understand them. They just know they’re there.”

The stinging indictment in those words has stayed with me because it rang true—and because I much prefer to focus on people and situations “out there” when I think about problems that warp the world in which we live. However, when I’m truly able to be honest with myself, I know that where I really need to focus, as a person of faith, is on problems “in here”, the parts of myself that reflect or unthinkingly buy into the invisible but very real social barriers that separate people from one another.

For example, I continue to learn, on an almost daily basis, more about the privileges I grew to adulthood thinking were universally shared but are so very limited. As a college educated white woman, I have been able to live my life in safe, comfortable neighborhoods and have meaningful work that pays a living wage. I own a home eat healthy food, drink clean water, have health insurance, own a car, travel nationally and internationally, have been able to enjoy leisure time—and so much more. How totally different my experience is from that of millions of women and men who didn’t have the opportunities that I have had in life! Should I feel guilty? No. But grateful and humbled and more self-aware, yes, indeed.

Inequality and injustice wound the lives of countless numbers of people, and there are invisible barriers that separate and have the potential to alienate me from neighbors near and far. So it is that to begin the process of deconstructing at least some of those invisible and alienating barriers, we need to become faithful nonconformists, making it our mission to re-discover and

embrace the almost totally forgotten virtue of humility. Romans 12 says it this way, "...do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are..."

To find a way forward toward social healing, we need to get to know people whose lives are entirely different than our own. We need to spend time in their company, hear their stories, walk their streets, worship with them, share a meal, experience at least some of what they experience, and, above all, expect and allow ourselves to be changed by what we learn. We have to be willing to take a good look in the mirror, to ask hard questions of ourselves, and to be honest about the fact that we may not like the answers. We need to learn the meaning of community all over again. And we have to acknowledge that in doing this, we will be swimming upstream in a narcissistic, fear-fueled, disdainful culture saturated with pride and prejudice.

What does it mean to live faithfully with courage and integrity in divisive and soul-scarring times? At least some of what it means is that faithful nonconformity is the order of the day. Refuse to sink to the lowest cultural common denominator. Rediscover true humility. Treat others with respect; speak and act with honesty; be compassionate and kind; embody an unflinching commitment to God's justice. "Do not be conformed but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

I leave you with words from Sister Joan Chittister, a wonderful Roman Catholic sister and author, from her book, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. Sister Joan writes: "Hope is not a denial of reality. But it is also not some kind of spiritual elixir. It is not a placebo infused out of nowhere. Hope is a series of small actions that transform darkness into light".

The great Hebrew prophet Isaiah wrote amid difficult times long ago, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them

has light shined.” Let us live our lives as if we believe that, being and becoming faithful nonconformists.

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