Conformed, or Transformed?

ROMANS 12:1-2 (NRSVUE) ***I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship.*** ***2*** ***Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.***
The Word of God for the people of God…

The sanctuary was almost full as excited people gathered eagerly as their new, minister, fresh out of seminary, mounted the pulpit for his first sermon. Congregations always are excited about a new minister. A new start: someone to make us grow—bring in young families… Big youth program… Full choir… Big offerings…

When I went to serve as associate minister at Harvard Avenue Christian Church in Tulsa, the senior minister, my friend and mentor, the late Bob Peake, introduced me as "The Messiah." You wanna' try living up to that image?

Well, the new minister preached his first sermon, and it was well received; in fact, it was really good. The next Sunday, word had spread, and the crowd was even bigger... And he preached the same sermon.

The people were a bit surprised, but, after all, he was young and inexperienced; and he was off to such a great start. He'd come around.

The next Sunday: same sermon. The elders met with him after church and tried to be encouraging, because he really was showing promise. They said, "We know you're new at this, and maybe this is the only sermon you have, but the church needs more. How can we help?

The young minister said, "Oh, I have several sermons prepared and ready, and when I see evidence that you've heard this one, I'll move to the next one."

It's a common ministerial sentiment (present company excepted, of course.)

On the other hand, depending on what one is learning, repetition is an accepted method of teaching. When I was in barber college—six months; we went through the textbook once a month. After six times, it was familiar. 63 years later, I still remember some of the vocabulary: papilla, follicle, alopecia senilis… (As a matter of fact I note several of us in the room who are experiencing "alopecia.")

So, I hope you will acknowledge some value to hearing once again what I expect is by now a familiar theme. That repetition that helped my 'ace' the barber exam isn't always a benefit when it comes to the Bible; although verses of Scripture that I memorized as a boy still bring comfort or encouragement or a sense of celebration in certain moments. The problem is: other memories get mingled in the equation and leave their fingerprints on the message of Scripture.

The Bible is a living document that has spoken to generations of Jews and Christians, and the message won't mean anything today it didn't mean when

originally written. The message doesn't change; but the language does. It's not just the obvious: translating from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek to English. The culture in which it is read changes from generation to generation—region to region in.

English, itself, changes. In my lifetime words like, 'blue,' 'cool,' and 'gay' have changed meanings. Words in the King James version don't all mean the same thing today they meant in 1611. There are more than 450 English versions of the Bible dating back to the Tyndale Bible in 1526, more than 50 are still in print and being revised and updated from time-to-time, and none of them are identical!

Some churches insist on the KJV; others prefer the NIV or the ERV or some other version, while we use the NRSVUE. As the old saying goes, "You can prove anything with the Bible," and with the multiplicity of translations, if you look long enough you can almost always find one that says what you want it to say.

It's hard to clear the attic: to discard fragments of remembered sermons and lessons and songs, to sweep away the dust that clouds our memories and the cobwebs that entangle unrelated concepts; to clear our minds and approach Scripture, as Dr. Craddock used to say, "fresh, as if for the first time."

And that's my song that you've heard—and the refrain is this: "We walk by faith, not by sight." And we will not have peace or confidence until we can acknowledge and accept that we may not get it right, *and that's OK*, because our relationship with God does not depend on getting anything right except that Jesus is God's Son and Savior of the World. How all of that works is called, "atonement;" and we don't even have to get that right or to prove anybody else wrong. The best we can do is admit, with Paul, "For now, we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end."

In that confession, we can rest in the promises of God and revel in the freedom of knowing that we don't have to understand all the mysteries of God. We're free to go about being who we've been created to be and doing what we've been created to do. And the simplest, clearest statement I know of that is still Micah 6:8: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." And that applies to individuals and to communities of faith.

If only we could leave it there. If only we could simply stand in awe and worship the mystery that is God.

Of course, it's mystery, but it's not as if we're left to drift like a ship without a rudder or an anchor. There are standards; there are guidelines. And that's a crucial awareness this afternoon as we enter a time of discernment, listening for God to speak to us—to hear God's vision for our church going forward.

For two months we've been praying—I hope you've been praying—for clarity and understanding. And the first step for us is to trust that God will, indeed, speak

to us in ways that we can understand, if we but listen in trust. And there are two guidelines I will be holding up:

First, the Corporate Wisdom of the Community of Faith. We will share personal insights and impressions we've received through prayer, and together we'll look for patterns and consensus. The promise of Jesus: ***"Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*** **(MATT. 18:19-20)**

We can trust that promise. We don't have to understand it and we may not get it right. But in trust we engage, with confidence that God can use even our mistakes; but more than that, if we later discern that what we are doing is not of God, there is redemption and guidance to bring us back into synch with God's purposes.

The second guideline is from today's reading from Romans 12: "***Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (complete or finished)."***

Note the active verbs as compared to the passive: "Do not be conformed (active); be transformed (passive). The GNB says, "***Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world*** (NLT says, ***"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world…"***) and both say, "***…but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind;" "…so that you may discern (active) what is the will of God."***

So, the second guideline by which we discern God's will is first a negative one to reject: "the standards, the behavior, and the customs of this world;" and second a positive value which we passively accept: an openness to the Will of God.

Earlier in the week I sent an email request for your examples of "the standards, the behavior, and the customs of this world." I had four responses.

One was that Halloween, the Easter Bunny, and colored eggs have taken over our Christian Holy Days. He suggested the secular values are OK, but can't we move them off the sacred days of Christianity?

Another response urges us to look at our social norms closely to see if they are defensible, because what is acceptable changes from generation to generation.

Another response equated the standards of this world with how we see and treat people: the world's standards sees people as commodities and relationships valued on the basis of "what's in it for me?"

A fourth response urges us to trust our instincts when seeking to know God's will. Trust that God will not ignore us, but may not always respond as we expect or desire.

In my own study and meditation, I came up with these impressions of what it means to conform or copy the world's values and standards:

We conform to the world's standard of excellence when we strive for **success** rather than **obedience**. We buy the lie that success is found in accumulating ("He who dies with the most toys wins!"). In contrast, Jesus asks, "What does it profit a man if he gains the world, but loses his soul?" (Matt. 16:24-26)

We conform to the world's standard of value when we strive for instant gratification rather than Christ's example of servanthood. We accept the marketing industry's slogans, "because you're worth it," "have it your way," "it's all about you," "*the customer is always right*". The church becomes a "religion store," where we go when we want religion; and we're the customers.

Though not all inclusive, these are among the standards Paul urges us NOT follow, but rather to let God change us from the inside—to let God transform the way we think. Ten days ago we focused on the story in the gospel when Jesus set a new standard by washing his disciples' feet. Today, may the attitude of Christ be ours as we seek to discern God's vision for our congregation, going forward.