



“TRUE TO FORM”
SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 12: 1-8
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, August 27, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

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.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The Word of the LORD
Thanks be to God.

Conformity is a survival skill. Just like remembering things that hurt more vividly than we remember things that feel good is a survival skill.

Conformity is a way to survive because our brains tell us it is how we secure belonging. We learn it in all sorts of ways—and we perform it in all sorts of ways. Like the way you talk when you are in different settings, like the things you want to buy, the way you see yourself in the mirror, the fact that you put on clothes before you leave your house.

These behaviors help you perform belonging with different orders of magnitude and with different layers of internalization.

The impulse to conform to your surroundings can also be a tool of oppression, suppression, assimilation, and internalized policing of our own imaginations, our own uniqueness, our own created nature.

In our capitalist, consumer, consumption culture, the impulse to conform is a powerful marketing tool and money making scheme.

Our psyches are colonized with all sorts of biases around how we look, what we buy, and how we feel about ourselves.

(Show images)

(Tretorns) Tretorns were the must have shoes for a little while during my adolescence and teenage years.

(White sneakers) Today it's the white sneaker must haves.

(More from Ork) I did love my mork from ork suspenders so much though! I even wore them for picture day in the 4th grade

(Super mom cooking) Cooking shows and the internalized expectations that those who identify as female should have a beautiful meal on the table every night are still right there in our culture.

(Vogue cover) all the ways we are taught aging is bad. This vogue cover is getting some heat for how airbrushed these famous super models in their 50s are. No wrinkles or laugh lines. All dressed in the same color. The NYT says they look for like AI Generated fakes than real people. We are taught to disdain signs of aging.

(Super Rich) And then there's capitalism's ace in the hole of conformist tools—the desire for wealth and the siren song of consumption and excess. Images of the super-rich and the finer things get inside us and tell us what it would look like to be highly favored, to have it made, to what for nothing, to finally be able to relax in your billion dollar house.

The thing about conformity though is it something our brain tells us will keep us safe, when in actuality it's not real safety at all. When we hide behind sameness or our stuff or our status, or when we try to be less of who we are so that others will be more comfortable —

we are also internalizing that it is not safe for us to be our true selves or to love what we love or to be authentic—we may have tried to fit in and conform for so long that we have actually lost contact with what we love, with who we are, with what it feels like to truly love who God made us to be.

And Christianity—the religion born from those pushed to the margins deciding to take a chance on true belonging and staking their lives on a non-conformist—a man named Jesus who did not conform to so many of the survival skills of his time. That religion became one of the most potent and withering tools of enforced conformity the world has ever seen.

Paul is a complicated ancestor of the Faith. And there's Paul the non-conformist, and then there's Paul who could be zealous, and then there's the way Paul has been used and weaponized by patriarchy and nationalism and homophobia and ableism and supremacy and lots of other tools of oppression the church has colluded with.

But here, in this passage in Romans, we can glimpse at Paul the revolutionary, Paul the decolonizer, Paul the encourager of non-conformity, Paul the theological fuel for the fire of the liberating social change Christianity has the power to foment.

Romans was written for people who were practicing the faith—not an evangelism-oriented letter. Very theological and elementally so.

And since then this book has grounded theological revolutions and institutional comeuppances—from the fall of Rome to the Protestant reformation to the clarion call of the German ecclesial resistance to Hitler.

Where does it call us in our revolutionary moment—when the empire of white supremacy is crumbling and on the March all at once, when Christianity has been occupied and colonized by whiteness, by capitalism, by patriarchy, by nationalism, by militarism.

Let us read Paul's words to believers living in an empire being revealed for its demonic possession through the lens of our own apocalyptic moment in history.

Let us Decolonize perfect, sacrifice, holy and acceptable, conformity, transformation, will of God, goodness.

Paul's radical reversal of what religious piety is in the belly of empire is a powerful word for us right now.

(More here about Paul's instruction to not conform and how skewed it gets when appropriate by the morality police—the ones who tried to turn Christianity into an apologetics for straight, white male capitalist normativity)

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.

White bodied people tend to be co-dependent with enforced conformity. We track our well-being according to how others are conforming to the standards we have internalized. When everyone is not conforming to whiteness, white bodied people sense danger and whiteness has taught us a few different moves: avoidance, aversion, intellectualization, violence, terror, hoarding resources, shaming, blaming.

We can see some of these moves in our own community—I am talking about GCPC, not just Asheville. White bodied people who miss the comfort of an all-white church—or the church they use to know. It's the lack of conformity to whiteness that repels them. And so, they leave. Often blaming others on their way out the door. They have a learned helplessness when it comes to believing in their own love ability outside the bounds of white conformity.

By love ability I mean their ability to both be loved and to love. That's what the conformity of whiteness does to all of us—not just people in white bodies. It goes so deep that it can seem almost god-like, almost like an inner voice, almost like a moral compass, almost like a conscience, almost like a virtue.

Paul's call to those in the belly of empire is BE NOT CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD!

But be transformed by the renewing of our minds. So that we may discern the will of God—and what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul is not talking about the demonic perfect that whiteness trades on—the hegemony of white bodied superiority, of able bodied, of straight cos gendered bodies, of one right way bodied. Paul is talking about the kind of perfect that is of God—when we live proper to our true nature, when we are aligned with our divine purpose, when we are free to be true to who God made us to be.

God didn't invent white bodied supremacy—greed did—and America codified it and christened it and Called it normal and built the architecture necessary to enforce conformity in every layer of our common life.

Paul knew that kind of empire—and he so eloquently reminds those seeking to follow Jesus in the midst of it that there is an internal authenticity, a God-given flame of who you are that they can't touch. That's what is perfect and acceptable and good about you and me.

Not our dress size or our bank balance or our address or our age.

We can even get fooled into turning non-conformity into another way to conform, another tool to try and make us feel safe in a world that really is not safe unless we come together and make it safe for everyone.

The truth is that the more each of us is conforming to feel safe and to feel like we belong, the less safe we all are. The more anxiety and stress we all carry about people actually finding out who we really are.

Paul is calling for a community that centers our God-given identity as the way we are perfect—perfect is not about external measures of acceptability. Perfect is about God's elegant imagination—and trusting that we are perfect in God's wisdom.

And this is not just about you and me as individuals accepting and befriending our own uniqueness. This is about the way communities become whole, become vibrant, become instruments of true freedom when we all show up as ourselves.

Body of Christ

Paul writes:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

This is not about hierarchy. This is about beloved community where we promise to each other that our collective safety depends on each of us showing up as our unique selves, our collective safety is not secured by conformity.

Who God is bringing to us at GCPC as others choose to leave tells us so much about God's power to transform. GCPC is being called so clearly not to conform, but to be transformed.

Being in a community where your created nature is who you need to be. Your gifts—the things you were made to be and do are why you are here and what we need from you.

This is the Freedom of Body of Christ.

You don't have to be all the parts, you are called to do and be your part.

That's different than the marketplace, that's different than the economy, that's different than the political twilight zone that is American politics. That's different than conformity.

You are not an either/or. You are not a political platform or a talking point, you are an integral and beautiful creation who helps to make this community whole and healing

Our new members who you will be meeting in a few minutes are an amazing gift to us as we continue this journey together.

Our whole life is our worship, not simply liturgical acts. The most worshipful, transformative, non-confirming, liberating thing we are doing together today is celebrating these 8 beautiful, amazing, unique, courageous, and faithful people who Spirit has brought to GCPC—and saying to them, “You are exactly who we have been waiting for to support who God is calling us to be together! Welcome Home!

Thanks be to God.

(MMS introduce the new member video and then Therese and Leon)