

“On Not Being Conformed”
by Rev. David J. Wood
The 3rd Sunday in Lent: March 8, 2025
First Congregational Church Camden, Maine

Romans 12: 1-2, 9-21

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.

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.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” Instead, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

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Remember how we used to talk about Millionaires like it was an exponential amount of money that only the elite few could contemplate ever possessing? Then, we started talking about Billionaires the way we used to talk about millionaires. We adjusted.

Now, we have begun to talk of Trillionaires. We adapt. We adjust. What was abnormal, even unthinkable becomes reasonable and acceptable... becomes a matter of course. We lose perspective.

Let me engage you in a little thought experiment.

If we translated one million in seconds, it would add up to 12 days.  
If converted one billion into seconds, it would add up to 31 years.  
If we converted one trillion into seconds, guess what it would add up to: 31,688 years.

Values morph. We adapt. We accommodate. Our perspective changes ever so subtly.  
Lose our sense of scale...and value.  
While we talking in the Trillions...and our sense of scale...  
The US Budget Deficit in 2025 was \$1.8 Trillion.  
The National Debt is \$38 Trillion.

That's a total indebtedness of around \$39.8 Trillion.  
The total wealth of **THE TOP 1%** in the United States is: \$55 Trillion.

I don't pose those numbers to somehow diminish the significance of our annual budget deficit or our National Debt or to somehow suggest that we could wipe out the deficit and debt by a simple transfer of wealth. I share those numbers to illustrate that we probably have a lot more capacity in this country to deal with deficits than we normally think or imagine.

Instead it's easy to imagine that what really threatens our financial well being in this country is

- raising the minimum wage or
- being overrun by immigrants—legal and illegal—who are largely employed in low wage jobs...
- or that it's impossible for us to consider healthcare for all...
- or universal childcare...

Our perspectives get skewed. Our imaginations atrophy. We don't work at it, it just happens.

I was reminded a week or so ago of my experience on the evening of January 16, 1991.  
That was the night CNN broadcast live pictures of our bombs reining down on Bagdad.  
I was spending a few days on the coast of Maine, in Port Clyde...just sitting down to have some dinner.  
As the "Breaking News" broke in, I remember how it shook me to the core.  
It was the first time in my lifetime that we had launched a war. I immediately packed up my things and headed back to Lewiston to be with Jennifer and the children...and my community.

A week ago, Saturday Jennifer called upstairs to tell me that we just bombed Tehran. My reaction was nothing like that night back in January of 1991. Eventually I came downstairs and turned on the news to see what was happening.

I wonder, are my senses being dulled.  
Am I becoming numb to the tragedy of things?  
Am I losing my mind...my heart...?  
Am I subtly adapting to a kind of fatalism, resignation, cynicism...

As one farmer said about sheep:  
Sheep don't suddenly go astray...  
they just nibble their way to lostness.

The Apostle Paul has a timely word for us who are prone to nibbling.

But before I get to that, let me say a brief word about the community to whom this letter was written...  
Congregation of Gentiles and Jews...with the heel of Caesar on their backs. Romans was written around 55 AD...Nero was Emperor of Rome from 54-68. Not too many years after this, he would launch one of the first waves brutal persecutions of Christians. This little community was fighting for their existence on the fringes of the most powerful, cultured, sophisticated, ruthless empire the world had known.

In the first 11 Chapters of this letter, Paul has been waxing eloquently about the love and mercy of God...  
"God shows his love to us in this—that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Nothing will separate us from the love of God...no hardship, no power, not even death...". Now here, in Chapter 12, he begins to spell out what it all means, how it translates into real life....

*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.*

“Spiritual”. Better translated...reasonable/logical/intelligent worship.

There is a logic at work here that is not of this world/age...even as it provides a logic/rationale for living here and now. Everything that follows only makes sense in light of the reality of the MERCIES OF GOD.

Our response, our worship, is not a matter of duty or obligation...or guilt...  
But of gratitude...thanksgiving... A logical response to the mercies of God.

Notice that Paul calls on his readers to make a *LIVING* sacrifice...not once for all...  
but a way of life...a way of being... As someone once put it,  
the trouble with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar.

He makes it very concrete...and basic:  
“present your bodies as a living sacrifice...”  
How do we do that? What does that look like?

THIS is a good start...  
Your Being here...You chose to get your bodies up, fed, coffee up,  
dressed and out the door...even after losing a whole hour of sleep...  
You bypassed a plethora of other choices...to be here  
Some of you traveled a few blocks..others several miles.  
You don't show up here by accident.  
You don't just stumble into this place.

In a meaningful way this morning,  
you have presented your bodies to God AS worship.  
The physical act is a deeply spiritual thing.  
I don't want to make too much of it...  
neither do I want you to make too little of it.

You are cutting against the grain...  
It is downright NONCONFORMIST.  
Not the end...but a worthy beginning.

As we move through our days, bombarded as we are by gushing fire hydrant of information, appeals,  
messages, and pitches: we inevitably retreat...we wall ourselves off for protection. Our sense of the  
world contracts.

HERE we move out of that SMALLER world...into a LARGER, more CAPACIOUS world...something  
larger and deeper...not isolated or etherial. BELONG TO SOMETHING LARGER...like the MERCIES of  
GOD.

It is here you are called to remember who you are.  
You, YOU, are HOLY and ACCEPTABLE to God.  
*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.*

Just what this way of being in the world is that Paul is calling us to –  
what does this NON CONFORMIST WAY OF LIFE look like?

Notice, Paul does not point us to some fundamental text, maybe the 10 Commandments... He does not list some basic rules...or propositions that we have to believe. What follows is about a good yard stick that any congregation should use if it wants to test it's non-conformity to the logic of this world.

Let love be genuine;  
hate what is evil;  
hold fast to what is good;  
(If we hate evil more than we love the good,  
we become nothing more than good haters.)

love one another with mutual affection;  
outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal;  
be ardent in spirit;  
serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope;  
be patient in affliction;  
persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints;  
pursue hospitality to strangers.  
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice;  
weep with those who weep. (We are a people of LAUGHTER *and* LAMENT)

Live in harmony with one another;  
do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly;  
do not claim to be wiser than you are. (Humility looms large not egos)

Do not repay anyone evil for evil,  
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.  
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

NOTICE that up to this point, his advice has come in  
groups of 2 or 3 bullet points.

**He breaks that rhythm here...given their reality, it makes sense:**

*Beloved, never avenge yourselves,  
but leave room for the wrath of God,  
for it is written, "Vengeance is mine;  
I will repay, says the Lord."  
Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them;  
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink,  
for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."  
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

We live in a world where evil is real.  
We cannot afford naivety...we have no sentimental view of the world.

The phrase that stood out to me was his admonition  
that we "LEAVE ROOM FOR wrath of GOD!"  
What happened to "the mercies of God?"

Here's what I think Paul is saying,  
"Leave room for God to be God.  
God is God. You are not."  
Who knows what God is going to do.

Keep this in mind:  
If, as we believe, Jesus was indeed God in the flesh,  
We know he suffered greatly at the hands of evil people...  
beyond what any of us ever will.  
We know that One of his last words before he died was to seek forgiveness for those who were torturing  
him to death.

Leave room for God...who knows what he will do.  
"Leave room for God" is probably about as good a piece of wisdom that there is.

We are so ready to conform God to our image...  
And when we do...war becomes righteous, evil become necessary,  
retribution becomes divine mandate that we are empowered to carry out.

A transformed life, a living sacrifice is a way of life that disrupts the logic of this world...  
Elsewhere, Paul says, "In Christ, there is not Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female..."  
Being transformed by the logic of the mercies of God means We don't get to divide people up and value  
them differently because of ethnicity or gender or legal status or citizenship...we don't get to grieve 6  
soldiers because they belong to us and call the deaths of 175 children and their teachers collateral  
damage...because they were Iranian.

To live by the logic of the mercies of God is to  
Break up the cycle of violence.  
And Sometimes it breaks our hearts.

Which is why we cannot live this way of life alone.  
We need each other..side by side..in the pew...in life.

All this talk we do here about grand and magnificent things.  
Like the mercy of God...must translate into minutia of our everyday lives,  
It must be embodied in an actual way of life that  
Defies the logic of this world....

Many years ago, I remember attending a national gathering of my denomination: The American Baptist  
Churches, USA. I was recruited to assist in the leading of the final worship service of the gathering.  
Much planning had gone into this final, culminating service. The plan was to conclude the service with  
the parading of a large cross down the aisle and out of the arena: a symbolic gesture that all we had been  
about in this gathering was meant to be taken from here and into the world.

The only problem was, in rehearsal, we discovered that the cross was too big to get out the door! Hmm.

I am grateful for the Apostle Paul breaks it down for us...brings it down to life-size bits that translate into  
our everyday lives.

I want to conclude with a quote from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, not known as a purveyor of *Christian* wisdom...

“What seems to be essential ‘in heaven and on earth’ is that there be *obedience* in one direction for a long time. In the long term, this always brings and has brought about something that makes life on earth worth living.”

“A long obedience in the same direction.”  
It doesn’t mean blind obedience to any cause.

It means *fidelity to a path*, even when it gets hard.

Not obedience as *submission*.  
But obedience as *rebellion* – against chaos, against apathy, against drift.  
Against mindless, acquiescence [from reflections by Dominic Medford]

*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.*

That seems like a good word for us...anytime..  
But especially for us in such as time as this. Amen.

PHONO SAPIENS...

"Phono sapiens" refers to a modern human species whose lives, communication, and thinking processes are fundamentally integrated with smartphones, acting as an extension of the body and mind

It takes a jab at the transformative power of phones. As our phones get smarter, we get dumber, I think. We stagger down streets, our heads bowed as if in prayer, glued to our phones. We are connected with the

Nietzsche is pointing to a paradox of modern life:

the more choices we have, the more tempted we are to *never choose deeply*.

We graze instead of dig.

We sample instead of surrender.

We become connoisseurs of novelty instead of students of mastery.

But meaning, he says,

comes not from *many directions*,

but from *depth in one direction*.

Worship as the act of PRESENTING OURSELVES to God..which inevitably, necessarily involves our presenting ourselves to one another in love.

In the wake of the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the role the churches played. As one East German put it, "The church provided the only free space. Everything that could not be discussed in public could be discussed in church and in this way the church represented the physical space in which people were free."

Good, pleasing and perfect...TRUE.

For truth is reality. That which is false is unreal. The more clearly we see the reality of the world, the better equipped we are to deal with the world. The less clearly we see the reality of the world—the more our minds are befuddled by falsehood, misperceptions and illusions—the less able we will be to determine correct courses of action and make wise decisions.

Our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are, and if we have decided where we want to go, we will generally know how to get there. If the map is false and inaccurate, we generally will be lost. Mental health is an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs.

WORSHIP ALWAYS ENTAILS:

God's remembering RESPONSE to us.

Enacting Our response to God

Embodying Our response to one another.

Being conformed is a kind of reflex most of us have.

Most of us are go with the flow kind of people.

We don't cut against the grain.

We go along.

When we were handing out advice to our kids,  
Few if any of us said:

There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

Notice there is now doctrinal statements here.  
This is where all good doctrine leads...to a way of life that is basically unreasonable according to the prevailing reason of this world/age.

It transforms our view NOT OF THE WORLD...but of ourselves and one another.  
I cannot simply think of people who live in Iran as first and foremost, Iranians. They are real people, living real lives, who happen to live in a different country...but they are no less worthy of my love and service.

Puts flesh on the bones of holding fast to the good and not just being captivated by hatred for evil...the latter is what we are supposed to do...it's not just that that hatred is not to become a justification for evil, violence in us.

It is a LIVING sacrifice...not external to ourselves...it involves our very selves, our way of life.

There are always other reasons...but THE reason that orders our lives, our way of being, is the MERCIES OF GOD.

The transformation he has in view is NOT an achievement, it is a gift...transformation is something that that happens to us.

Room for suffering, hope, perseverance in prayer, taking care of each other...making room for the stranger...living in harmony

Pay attention to that hesitation...that discomfort...that resistance...the impulse to go against the tide... therein lies the possibility of transformation.

This is not something we do ALONE...even though its something no one else can do for us...it is what we can do with one another.

"Bodies"...plural. We are ONE BODY in Christ. Be we are BODIES.

Body = this wonderful, mysterious, troubling thing we call our bodies. Profoundly spiritual.