

Continuing in our sermon series about how to live in community in a day and age when the world around us is full of noise and debate about the upcoming election, this week we return to the letters of Paul.

We are spending time reading through four different letters that Paul wrote to his congregations to glean wisdom for how we might practice the art of community in the midst of a culture that tries to divide us. Because, as different as Paul’s time is from our own in many ways, what is the same is that his churches...and ours...are made up of people who navigated these pressures.

Over the past few weeks, we’ve already visited Paul’s churches in Corinth and in Galatia. Today we will visit Paul’s church in Rome.

Before I read this morning’s Scripture, let us be centered in prayer and then grounded in the moment through the music of the choir. First, let us pray:

Before we hear these words that come to us from long ago, O God, help us take a breath and remember that...by your Holy Spirit...they still speak. So give us fresh ears to listen...and then courage to follow where your word leads. We ask in faith and in Christ’s name. Amen.

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I am reading from the 12th chapter to Paul’s letter to the Romans, beginning at the first verse. Listen with me for the word of God...

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 judgement, 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.

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Okay. But at the beginning of this sermon, let me start with a confession...maybe it is a gripe. It’s about something that the Apostle Paul wrote in today’s Scripture.

I know I’m supposed to respect Paul. And I do. His letters are considered to be Scripture. We are reading portions of those letters this month to help us build our own capacity for strengthening the community...and connective tissue...of this congregation in the midst of a backdrop choppy partisan waters this election season.

But here’s my gripe...it’s Paul’s opening salvo in this chapter: *“Do not let yourselves 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.”*

Thanks, Paul.

Now how are we gonna do that?

Do not be conformed to the world?

Show of hands: who in here wore clothes to church this morning that you might not have worn if you were spending the day in your kitchen drinking coffee and eating a late breakfast? (I really wish I could see those of you watching us online who are drinking coffee and eating a late breakfast right now in your kitchen...)

Who has ever bought an outfit, or a pair of shoes, or gone for a “certain look” based on a trend you wanted to follow, or an athlete or model or actor who wore it first, or friend whose style you thought was worth imitating?

And that’s just the way we dress!

Just think about all the other ways...

Do not be conformed to the world?

...okay.

I wish Paul was a little more realistic. Like, I’d rather Paul had said:

“Try not to be so conformed to this world...”

Or...

“Make sure – in spite of the ways you won’t be able to help being conformed to the world around you – make sure you remember your highest calling...to reflect the will of God.”

And yet, quoting a friend of mine: That’s not what the brother said¹.

¹ The Rev. Reggie Weaver

What Brother Paul said was “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...”

To be honest with you all – that’s kind of why I think a sermon series like this is important. Whether you consider yourselves progressive, moderate, conservative; Democrat, Republican, or Independent; socially-liberal, libertarian, or a family-values voter...if any of those labels apply or have ever applied to you (like they have to me) – guess what? One of the goals of every political ideology is to try to get us to conform to their worldview. **A lot** of money gets spent by every political party and movement to try to do just that: convince people – by digital advertising, news media, direct mail, online algorithms – convince people...whatever way they can...to conform to the party-line, the party-platform, the party-message.

And if that is the goal – then where is the room in that equation for integrating the gifts and talents of those who do not fit into that party-line? And if there isn’t room for those gifts and talents, then what does that mean about the person’s worth and value? And how does that mean we are allowed to treat those kinds of people?

This is the great shortcoming of the way our political process has become tribal: We’ve lost the ability to see the humanity of those whose ideas do not conform to that of our “team.”

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I started this sermon with a gripe about Paul holding up an impossible standard, but let me also give him a compliment: At least the vision that Paul wants us to achieve has room for all different kinds of people.

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.

You’ve probably heard a sermon or two in this verse.

Today, we welcome Audrey Webb as our new Director of Youth Ministry. As I mentioned in the announcements this morning, you will get a chance to meet her after worship at Lemonade on the Lawn.

One of the many ways that Audrey will build relationships with our youth and nurture their faith this year is by helping organize them to lead Youth Sunday next Spring. When I was a teenager, I’ve been in few Youth Sundays. I’ve had a job like Audrey’s where I helped to organize Youth Sunday. And I’ve enjoyed being led by worship by youth a whole lot of times. In all of my experience, I would say that...I don’t know...maybe close to half of the Youth Sunday sermons I have heard are on this verse from Paul’s letters: *...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

I used to think this verse was so popular with the youth because it was an image that you could get your head around. The church as Christ’s body. Each of us being a part.

But when I think about it, and can picture the nervous sixth graders