

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
The Discipline of Paying Attention
Romans 12.1-2
August 27, 2023

Change is inevitable. It's just a matter of how you change. That's what matters. "Change is inevitable," said George Bernard Shaw, "but growth is optional." There's a difference between change and growth.

Nothing stays the same forever. In our gospel reading this morning, a massive change is underway in Peter and the disciples' understanding of Jesus and themselves and the whole world. Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, but then Jesus "began to show them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed and on the third day be raised." Peter actually feels duty bound to admonish the Master because, in his mind, the Master could not come to such an inglorious end. No Messiah would do that. This insistence that the way he understood things was the way they must remain. . .that did not go well. It's not a great day when you hear, "Get behind me, Satan".

St. Paul stresses the point about change and growth when he writes about *conforming* and *transforming*. This is one of the first scripture passages I ever memorized and so has always been special to me. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect."

Digging in just a little: "Conformed" is from the root *schema* which is the outward form, the exteriors of the world, which as you know vary from year to year and even day to day. It's like the fashion of the moment, which changes and changes again for little real purpose other than change itself. The other day, I was reminiscing with someone that back in the '80s—yes kids, the 1980s, the last century—my dreadful parents wouldn't let me get a pair of parachute pants. Parachute pants were so awesome. They were made from nylon similar to actual parachutes, but the best part was the zippers. So many awesome zippers all over the pants. Zippers that lead to nowhere. Everyone had them, I mean, everyone in the world but me. And I was dejected. I mean, I could pop my collar, I could double stack my Izods, but without parachute pants, I was forlorn. Then, just about the time I'd worn my parents down enough to get a pair, just like that, they were out of style. Parachute pants--out; baggy pants--in. It's one silly reminder that everything changes. (Except the weather...the weather never, ever changes anymore...It's just this forever, I think...God help us.)

Keeping in mind the idea of everything changing, according to one commentator, the Apostle's wisdom is, "Don't try to match your life to all the fashions of this world; don't be like a chameleon which takes its color from its surroundings." The world's always changing. To be conformed to such a world is yourself to always to be in motion, always churned up, always stirring, never at rest, never satisfied, never with conviction, never fully present, always consuming and discarding, always moving from one thing to the next to the next, searching for

something substantial in a world, that in the eyes of the wise sage in Ecclesiastes, is vanity. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Don't be like that.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer who has spent a life resisting the absurdity of the world, warns what conformity looks like:

Go ahead and be confirmed:
 Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
 vacation with pay. Want more
 of everything ready-made. Be afraid
 to know your neighbors and to die.
 And you will have a window in your head.
 Not even your future will be a mystery
 any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
 and shut away in a little drawer.
 When they want you to buy something
 they will call you. When they want you
 to die for profit they will let you know.

This is the wisdom: do not be conformed with the outward appearance of the world, this world of vanity.

This doesn't mean that we are just to dig in our heels, stuck in some mud, determined never to change. That's not really possible. Even the mud you dig your heels in is changing, and you are changing, growing, aging, adapting, learning new things, gaining new perspectives, hopefully maturing in your faith and discipleship. Growth is a necessary part of spirituality. If you're 28 years old, but your faith is still like it was when you were 12 years old and you were baptized, it's little wonder why you probably feel the disconnect, why you might say, "My faith isn't working anymore." Yeah. It doesn't.

Change and growth, adaptation, and renewal of our minds as Paul puts it. These are good things. That's some irony right? Change as conformity to a world that's always shifting sand is not good. Change as being like clay in the transforming hands of the master potter is a good thing. Either way we are being changed. We are not static beings. The only question, as Brett Gibson often puts it, is how are you being formed. Be intentional about it. In Paul's language: it is either being conformed or being transformed. Spiritual transformation goes deep. That goes all the way down.

Take Peter, for example. In insisting that the Messiah would not suffer as Jesus said he would, Peter was digging his heels in on a long-standing theology of the Messiah as a conquering hero who would defeat the enemies of Israel. The Messiah, in every way Peter understood, would not go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed. The Messiah would go to Jerusalem, kick down the doors, restore the Temple and the glory, and rule with authority. But at this critical moment, Jesus ushers in a theological crisis and theological transformation. He zigs where Peter expects

him to zag. The Messiah, Jesus teaches them, is like the suffering servant in Isaiah, he who will take on the suffering of the people and yet emerge victorious. Not by sword and shield but by death and resurrection. For Peter and the other disciples, this was a total change of their understanding. To follow him one step further would require the beginning of total transformation in their understanding of Christ and of what following Christ requires of them.

Are we being transformed? Are we allowing God to do this deep, transformative work in our lives and our spirits? Are we allowing God to renew our minds in Christ? If so, where's it evident? Commentator David Brooks recently asked, "Why have Americans become so mean?"¹ He thinks we are not submitting ourselves to deep transformation, and he thinks we have become so mean. And thinks the problem is our failure to practice true formation rather than tribal conformity to angry politics and relentless consumerism. The moral formation we need is the kind that helps us answer the big questions of life, not just lurch along, blown by the latest trends, outrages of your tribe, causes or consumptions of the moment.

Brooks writes: "Moral formation, as I will use that stuffy-sounding term here, comprises three things. First, helping people learn to restrain their selfishness. How do we keep our evolution-arily conferred egotism under control? Second, teaching basic social and ethical skills. How do you welcome a neighbor into your community? How do you disagree with someone constructively? And third, helping people find a purpose in life. Morally formative institutions hold up a set of ideals that helps us address these kinds of big questions. They provide practical pathways toward a meaningful existence . . ."

For a path of moral formation, Brooks turns to the wisdom of Iris Murdoch who he says offers the best modern approach to building character. "Murdoch's character-building formula roots us in the simple act of paying attention: *How do I attend to you well?* is the beginning of my moral formation in relationship with you . . . This requires not just a good heart, but good social skills: how to listen well. How to disagree with respect. How to ask for and offer forgiveness. How to patiently cultivate a friendship. How to sit with someone who is grieving or depressed. How to be a good conversationalist."

Years ago there was a poster that hung on many of our classroom walls that said something like "Everything I needed to know, I learned in Kindergarten." It's not entirely wrong, though the challenges of applying what you learn in kindergarten grow as you do.

Notice, too, that Murdoch's character-building formula begins in the same spiritual practice from St. Clare of Assisi that enables us to love God and care for creation, including one another: the simple act of paying attention. Which is not so simple, when we are trained to never really pay attention at all but to lurch from one distraction and consumption to the next. When we cultivate the discipline and the heart to really pay attention to scripture, to one another, to God's presence in our midst... when we cultivate this, we study, we listen, we contemplate, and we grow.

¹ David Brooks, "How America Got Mean," *The Atlantic* (August 14, 2023)

And let us remember that Christianity goes even further than what Brooks says is practical pathways to meaningful existence. This is the fork in the spiritual path that Jesus made plain to the disciples. Christianity is just as much about deeply impractical pathways toward meaningful existence. Christians don't just restrain their selfishness, but learn to lay down their lives. Christians don't just welcome a neighbor into the community, but learn to love their enemies. Christians don't just find a purpose in life that satisfies them, but learn to discover their purpose in Christ in the life of the community of faith. Christians transformation goes deep, all the way down. Just as God the Creator put his hands in the dirt to create the first man, *adam* from the *adamah*, just so when God gets his hands on you, God has all of you.

We better learn the discipline of simply paying attention if we are to grow in the way of Jesus. He will change you. To not be conformed to this world is to resist being blown around like a leaf by every new thought, idea, movement, or doubt. Being transformed means being open to God's ways over our ways. There's a humility needed here and a patience and a quietness, deep within us that is open to the Spirit. This is Paul on the road to Damascus, changed by the bright light and the word of God; Peter in his dream to welcome Gentiles in Acts 10-11, changed. This is Moses leaving the privileged life of Pharaoh's palace to identify with his people in their suffering and liberate them. This is the transformation that happens in each of us when God gets a hold of us, and we can't help but see and live in the world in a new way. This is conversion.

Conversion, in the way of Christ, to borrow from another pastor's phrase, is ongoing for those who continue to grow in their faith. It is the life-long quest to give as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you know. And it is an invitation for you, wherever you are, no matter how fully and totally you have neglected to give as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you know, it's an invitation that is always on offer in the grace of God for you to begin again today.

Spiritual growth, true transformation, is the joy of trusting God in everything. God has given us what we need to be liberated from selfishness, to practice hospitality, and to find our purpose in life: we have the gospel, eucharist, prayer, the community of faith. And then there are those moments or seasons in life—pay attention to them--when we are challenged in every way to grow in new dimensions of trust in Christ. Through the daily formation and the refining fires of trials, to lose our lives, in the sense of giving it, offering it through love and in love, is to receive life liberated from our selfishness and the way of death, to receive life newly purified, full—in this and in every moment, full of eternity.

Thanks be to God. Amen.