

I. Introduction:

Today we're hearing a Bible passage that is historically very familiar to Mennonite ears. I checked out topic of "nonconformity" in the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (*gameo*). It tells me that for nearly 500 years, the Mennonite and Anabaptist focus on nonconformity to the world, has drawn from this very text. Mennonites, Amish, and other Anabaptist groups in Europe & North America have continually come back to Romans 12:1-2 to support a doctrine of nonconformity.

How many of you have ever heard at least one sermon from this text? How many have heard this preached multiple times? (*show of hands*) This was especially prevalent in Mennonite churches in the 1940s and 50s. In my opinion, too often the object of these sermons was to "keep people in line" with the behavior standards of the church. Ironically, nonconformity was achieved by getting people to conform to some very rigid behavior codes against what was considered worldly behavior. Examples:

- How you wore your hair or your beard
- How long your dress was
- What kind of vehicle you drove
- What you did for fun on Friday nights

How many of you have personal experience with this understanding of nonconformity? (*hands ... still a significant number because we live in Elkhart County, but in the 21st Century, this experience is increasingly rare, except in Amish churches*)

I didn't choose this text today to give you another legalistic list of "worldly" things you must not do. I chose it because it challenges some of our assumptions about change.

II. Let's look at this famous text

A. Apostle Paul's early chapters in letter to Romans establish God's just & righteous character

1. Paul shows God's intended purposes of salvation for Jews & Gentiles by God's grace thru faith and not works
2. Having described the life of hope available to us through God's Spirit, Paul pleads with his Roman readers ... issues a challenge:
3. **PRESENT YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE**

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

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.

a) God wants & deserves all of you ... so be a living sacrifice

You know the problem with living sacrifices, don't you? They keep crawling themselves off the altar!

Last year Pastor Cindy preached a sermon focusing a lot on us as living

sacrifices ... In that message, I expected her to use that particular line, but she never did. So now it's my turn

b) Being a living sacrifice means putting yourself wholly at God's disposal, completely at God's service

Text: Romans 12:1-2

(Under Construction series; Signs: Yield, Pardon our progress) 2

c) It means God's purposes and God's will become more important to you than your own personal direction and purposes

4. In terms of current series, it means we YIELD to God

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

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.

a) We recognize our human limits and sinfulness ... that we are powerless on our own to be righteous before God

b) And just like those living sacrifices keep crawling off the altar, it means we keep coming back to this YIELD sign ...

c) YIELD must become a very frequent road sign in our lives of faith, reminding us

of our constant need to be open to God's direction, lest we end up in a spiritual ditch

B. Paul goes on in v. 2 to amplify what it means to be a living sacrifice ... Presents a big contrast between 2 verbs:

1. Being conformed ... & being transformed

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

²Do 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.

a) Notice movement in the tone of this passage

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

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.

First it's about yielding as a living sacrifice ... putting yourself on that altar ... It's about NOT putting yourself in charge

Then in v. 2 at first the word to us is also a negative charge: Don't be conformed to this world

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

²Do 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.

b) But quickly Paul moves to a positive instruction ... what God DOES want us to do: Be transformed!

2. The tone of how we talk about change is different here. And that's why I wanted us to hear this passage in a series on change:

a) Change here is a positive God-given command

The change named in Rom. 12:2 does not show up here as something to resist ... something to put up with ...

It is not just something we seek therapy as a way to cope with

b) NO: Godly change is a good thing ... it's something we move toward, not run away from

In this way it represents progress, which is why it reminds me of our 2nd road sign for today

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

²Do 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.

When you do a remodeling project in your house, it is temporarily a mess and very inconvenient ...

(a) Parts of your house are just not accessible, but you put up with it because you know how much better it will be when it's all done

(b) The house will be transformed into a more beautiful or more functional living space

(c) And that transformation is a good thing, even though it can seem slow and dirty and annoying while you're going through it

III. Let's poke around a little more with Rom. 12:2 & these contrasting verbs

A. Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world, but notice he doesn't contrast "conformed" with "unformed"

1. There are people in our culture who oppose having to conform to something else ... who just want to be free from all restrictions and expectations

2. Friends, that is not biblical faith

a) God's spiritual opposite of conformity is not rebellion

b) It's not refusing all rules & expectations, which can settle into moral chaos & relativism

3. God's desired alternative to being conformed is being transformed

B. What does that word "transformation" mean?

1. Simply means a change in form: form changes are visible and noticeable

2. If you are a transformed person, that transformation will be noticed

a) Transformation is not subtle ... it can't be hidden

b) It doesn't "fly under the radar"

C. What the words "conformed" and "transformed" have in common is their root word: "formed"

1. All of us are being formed all the time:

a) No matter how independent we think we are ...

b) No matter how much we claim to play by our own rules, we are all being formed all the time.

c) The question becomes, "How are we being formed?"

2. The natural and easy thing to do is to be conformed to worldly patterns

a) In fact, it's so easy you don't have to try at all ... Even without being aware of it, we're all being conformed to the patterns of this world. How?

By the people we work with ... & friends we hang out with ...

By the media we consume ... & the music we listen to

By the stuff we read ... & just by living in this country

b) Because conformity to the world's values is so easy, that's why it's important to note the grammar for that Greek verb for "conformed"

The grammatical form implies the stopping of an ongoing action ... Paul in Romans 12:2 is not telling us, "Choose not to be conformed"

The Greek word assumes we are already conformed, so it's saying "Stop being conformed ... instead, be transformed ..."

3. If godly transformation is what God wants for us, how shall we be transformed?

a) I'll come back to that shortly, although there's more than one good answer for that

b) So we're talking about transformation because God says it's a good and needed thing ...

c) but my experience in 19 years of pastoring tells me that most church folks I've known are not excited about change & aren't eagerly seeking the next transformation opportunity

IV. So why do so many of us instinctively resist change? Why do so many conversations about change carry a negative edge?

A. The fact that most of us do not instinctively welcome change is partly just a matter of human nature ... to a certain degree all people prefer stability, because it's exhausting when everything around you is constantly changing

1. But I think the human nature argument is only partly true.
2. At a deeper level, the assumptions we make about wanting to keep things the same say as much about who we are as they say about change itself

B. We are mostly middle & upper-class white people here at Waterford, living overall comfortable lives

1. Moreover, many of us grew up in strong Xian homes, where we were not exposed to habits of laziness ... drug & alcohol abuse ... physical abuse ... promiscuity ... or cheating in school or @ work
 - a) In other words, we aren't seen as what respectable society would call "bad sinners" ... and we take some quiet pride in that
 - b) We live clean lives (at least publicly) & we try to associate with other clean-living folks ... In truth we often act like we don't need saving ...
 - c) The fact is that most of us are just plain lucky to be born as we were ... & we are blessed beyond what is "fair" or what we deserve
 - d) And those of us with white skin live most of our lives never realizing the doors that are opened, and the preferential treatment we silently receive, compared to people of color in this country. It's embedded in the air that we breathe and the systems that we work in.

2. An example of my privilege hit me just this week:

Janette & I decided on Thursday on the spur of the moment to go out to eat for supper. We showed up at a popular Mexican restaurant, only to find it surprisingly closed. So we went somewhere else.

Only later did I learn that Thursday was an informal national "Day without immigrants" as a way to highlight the contributions of immigrants to U.S. business and culture. Thousands of restaurants, construction companies and other businesses were closed around the country. In the Goshen community schools, student absences were far higher than usual that day.

White privilege is the fact that I somehow didn't hear about this organized day ahead of time or

even as it was happening. White privilege is that my friends and family did not tell me about it. White privilege is the fact that the only inconvenience to me was having to eat somewhere else, without fear that "my people" will be badmouthed in the press.

C. Why am I emphasizing white privilege in a sermon on change and godly transformation?

1. I want us to consider that people who resist change and want things to stay the same are usually 1) comfortable, 2) wealthy, 3) powerful, or all 3.
 - a) Comfort, wealth and power are not inherently sinful, but they can act to bring God's transformation in someone's life to a grinding halt
 - b) Jesus told numerous parables to make that same point
2. So people who are suffering the effects of poverty, or oppression and physical threats ... do you think they want everything to stay the same?
3. Whether you dread changes in the status quo, or whether you welcome such changes, depends a lot on your life circumstances ...
 - a) A characteristic of white privilege is to believe it doesn't exist
 - b) Could our own obsession with comfort and stability be blinding us to transformation opportunities God is already bringing us?
4. I know I'm pushing the envelope here, so I want to close by returning to godly transformation

V. Wish to share 3 ways we can move toward Romans 12 type of transformation

A. 1st is to start with that YIELD sign

3 Ways Toward Godly Transformation

I. Start with YIELDing

- Keep surrendering to God
- Try Centering Prayer

1. Keep surrendering yourself to God every day ... hourly if you have to ...

- a) if you've crawled off that altar as a living sacrifice, humbly put

yourself back there, for God's aim is to love you, not destroy you

b) Pray for a heart that is open to transformation

c) Ask God to help you see God's possibilities in the changes that are accosting you, even when your instinct is to fight tooth & nail against those changes

2. One particular way to grow in yieldedness and transformation is a spiritual practice I've recently been attempting – Centering prayer

a) Centering prayer is a form of contemplative prayer designed to help us connect with God beyond words and thoughts and images

b) If you've only thought of prayer as "conversation with Jesus",

centering prayer is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to deeper communion with Him.

c) I am by no means "successful" at this and I'm really just a novice. But even though I find it rather difficult and unconventional, my spirit lately has felt more at peace thru my feeble attempts at centering prayer.

d) If you're interested in learning more about the method of Centering Prayer I have a few brochures I can give you or connect you with a helpful web link http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/private/32977/field-file/method_cp_eng-2016-06_0.pdf

B. For those of us from European heritage, another path toward transformation is to seek out other Christian views about how life as a person of faith looks different from other perspectives

This can especially happen in 2 ways:

3 Ways Toward Godly Transformation

- I. Start with YIELDing
 - Keep surrendering to God
 - Try Centering Prayer
2. Seek out other Christian perspectives
 - Educate yourself
 - Build relationships with people who are very different from you

1. The simpler way is to educate yourself by traditional resources

a) Find some reading materials that challenge your assumptions about basic institutions like the economy or our educational or health care systems ... e.g. last year Pathfinders SS Class studied Michelle

Alexander's book The New Jim Crow, about racism in our American criminal justice system

b) Seekers Class recently had a brief introduction to the Doctrine of Discovery, which underlies centuries of injustices still being perpetrated against indigenous peoples. Mennonite Central Committee has excellent resources online about Doctrine of Discovery. You have an easy chance to learn more coming up on April 23 when our guest preacher will be Sarah Augustine, herself an indigenous person from a Mennonite congregation

2. A more powerful way of transformation is to build up personal relationships with people who are very different from you

a) Sometimes it happens by deliberately seeking out or taking advantage of relationships near home that other people would just ignore:

Maybe it's your neighbor who is Latino or Muslim, or perhaps it's a co-worker that you try to get to know beyond surface pleasantries

Again my own perspectives of Christian ministry have been broadened greatly by learning to know Pastor Jose Luis Gutierrez, and Pastor Robert Hunt ... men of color, both of them

b) If you don't interact with persons from an ethnic minority very often, you certainly rub shoulders with people whose education level or political views are very different from yours

Mennonite peacebuilder John Paul Lederach, in a recent opinion post at themennonite.org, gave a very simple yet challenging

suggestion when we live in such politically divided times:

Give yourself the gift of finding one person with whom you disagree and commit to having coffee once every few months with each other for the rest of your life

I doubt very many of us have had the courage to give ourselves that gift! https://themennonite.org/opinion/practicing-compassion-churchwide-disagreements/?utm_source=TMail&utm_campaign=9987c83cb6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_02_06&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_710b2b7199-9987c83cb6-96748413

c. Finally, there's 1 more way toward transformation I'm suggesting: **Accept & celebrate that you are a work in progress**

3 Ways Toward Godly Transformation

1. Start with YIELDing
 - Keep surrendering to God
 - Try Centering Prayer
2. Seek out other Christian perspectives
 - Educate yourself
 - Build relationships with people who are very different from you
3. Accept and celebrate that you are a work in progress



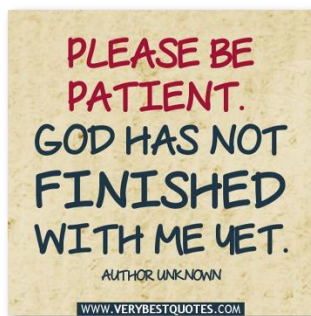
1. When things feel jumbled and chaotic in your life, reach for this sign and be reminded of the progress God is steering you toward

2. If you're a perfectionist like me, just getting to that realization is itself a transformation:

a) To celebrate God's progress in your life is to stop expecting perfection from yourself or from others ...

b) It means allowing God's grace to permeate deeply into you, so you can let go of those belittling words "It's not good enough."

3. And if it's not that sign, then maybe you need this classic phrase, "Be patient. God has not finished with me yet"



VI. Conclusion

A. Friends, we are all being formed all the time ...

1. The question is, "HOW are we being formed?"
2. As we keep returning to that YIELD sign before God, that's a good time to confess that too easily we conform to the values and thinking of the world around us

B. But God is in the transformation business, hallelujah!

C. Let us offer ourselves anew to God as those living sacrifices, open to God's will by the renewing of our minds!