

Conformed and transformed. Those two words are so persuasive to me each time I come to this scripture. They sort of reach out and grab! They shout their instruction as though the Apostle Paul were here in the room, magically transported from the first century. We don't really need anything else but those two words do we? We know what this is about. We have heard it again and again in our Biblical walk.

Conform. Conformity. According to the English Thesaurus (US version) conformity, when used as a noun means, Becoming compliant; submitting, Being like everyone else. Standing for traditional values. It means obedience. Being orthodox. Being a real fan of conventionality.¹ **Conform.** The Encarta Dictionary (English) edition defines it this way: "doing and thinking as others: behaving or thinking in a socially acceptable or expected way."²

Paul says, "Be NOT conformed." Hmm. That's curious. It seems that much of the rhetoric that we hear today from angry people who, it seems, are paid by health and pharmaceutical conglomerates are screaming at our senators and congressmen and , through the media, at us, to CONFORM. We are being told that traditional health care, traditional ways of doing things, traditional and ancient understandings of science and religion and the split between them, are what we are to believe. We are being told that conforming to the way it is ~ is the way we are to be, to do, and to act. It seems that we are being called, as Christians, to conform.

You know, 10 years ago, even 15 years ago when I would preach a sermon on this passage, I could wax eloquently (well, I thought it was eloquent!) about secular society and the sins of avarice and greed that seemed to consume us before the turn of the century.

¹ English Thesaurus (U.S.) (Microsoft Word)

² Encarta Dictionary: English (North American) (Microsoft Word)

But, we've come to a much more dangerous crossroads in this time of our lives. We've come to a cross road that calls on each and every one who is a Christian to speak out truthfully and carefully about health reform. We are called to see health care reform as a moral and ethical issue.

We have seen a strident and vocal few this summer take over town debates on health care reform in Town halls all over our Country. They are a frightened few who speak the loudest because they have been scared into believing the lies of the special interest factions who are intentionally stirring people up.

As a result of this faction, the first significant health care reform that might occur in over 60 years stands to be scuttled.

Conformity comes at a great price these days. It comes at the price of 30,000 children who will die every day of every month of every year from hunger³ because, as a nation we have become conformed to the ways that are socially acceptable. It comes at the price of millions of people who have no health insurance or are under-insured.

Conformity is a dangerous thing. It can help us behave and think in a socially acceptable manner, and lose our souls.

Paul said, :”Be not conformed to the 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.”

Transformed. In Greek the word is metamorphosed. We understand it much better in terms of the natural world. We know what it means for a small caterpillar to undergo metamorphosis and become a butterfly. We don't think of it that way, though, when we consider our own lives. Somehow, transforming our selves falls into the realm of magic; something that we reserve for philosophical musings about the Holy Spirit.

³ http://go.sojo.net/campaign/30000_children

Again, the Encarta Dictionary defines “transform” as “to change completely for the better.” Interesting, huh? “for the better.”

Who decides?

Who decides what is better? And, if transforming includes changing my MIND for the better, then what is “discernment?” What place does it play in how I change my MIND toward discernment?

What does discernment look like? Have you ever done a jigsaw puzzle? It helps to see the big picture; the picture on the top of the box; then you turn all the pieces over and begin to search for the sky. Piece by careful piece, you put together the sky and then the earth, and then the pieces in between. And, then there comes a time in the puzzle when you lose yourself in it and the pieces sort of magically fall into place, and soon you see the last piece. You snap it into place with a finality that fills some deep need for completion in you.

The secret to discernment is like putting together a puzzle. First you START. Then you KEEP AT IT. Sometimes you give yourself a REST from it, but you ALWAYS COME BACK. Then, you WORK AND WORK AND WORK. Discernment is like that. The work of it is prayer. But there comes a time in your discernment when things fall into place and you know that God is a part of your life and your thinking.

This question is a very real one for us here in California. We have a budget that is being balanced on the backs of the last, the least and the lost.

And yet, what does the popular culture tell us we should do now? Well, it tells us that we should “shore up” our options. We should think shrewdly and businesslike. It tells us that good business acumen understands. It tells us that we should take care of ourselves, be sure that we are covered and that our children are covered. It gives us many suggestions about how to care for ourselves and our families.

What does Paul say about conformity vs. transforming our minds so that we can WHAT? DISCERN what it is the Holy Spirit would have us do.

Discernment is the key. And discernment does not come with business degrees. It does not need an MBA. Discernment does not follow a straight path from point A to point B. Discernment does not rely on empirical data. It knows that the Spirit blows as it will. No. Discernment waits on the Lord. Discernment knows that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength; they will mount up on wings as eagles. Those who practice the discipline of discernment know that they shall run and not be weary, and walk and not faint. Those who have transformed their minds and disciplined their Spirit to be discerning know that to be a Christian means that you lean on God for answers. You are not conformed to what the World says. You are not conformed to the one who yells the loudest. You are transformed by the exercising of your MIND in discernment about what the Holy Spirit has to say to YOU about the matters facing our Country.

When discernment is practiced, there is a way that the Spirit has of seeing that all the questions are answered; that all the “i’s” are dotted and all the “t’s” are crossed.

When we allow God’s transformation in our lives, we know that we do not have to be conformed to what the secular world says about our beliefs. We know that we have been given wisdom from God.

This is a time of deep discernment for many in our Country and for many in our church. I pray that you will give yourself time to discern what the Spirit is saying to you.

It is not hard to know the principles of Christianity. They are in the deeds of Jesus. They are not in the deeds of the bloody history of the Christian church. While history is a valuable contributor to our understanding of our present life, it is not the ONLY thing to which we need to be listening.

In our Isaiah passage this morning, we learn that God is always present. God is a promise maker and a promise keeper. God was in the world, long before the United

States was, and will be long after. God wants what is best and what is healthy and what is compassionate and loving for us and for our country and for our church. And, given the chance, God will provide.

Our task is to be transformed. Our task is to listen. Our task is to discern.

Let us pray:

God of our ancestors, and God of our children: We pray that you will give us eyes to see and ears to hear the ways that you would have us transform in this world. May we use our minds to discover more about whom you are so that we can more properly discern what you would have us do. Give us patience. Give us compassion. Give us razor sharp instincts in our decision making. Be with us now, we pray. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.