

## WELCOME BACK (AGAIN!)

Romans 12:1-8

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Our reading today comes to us from the book of Romans, the apostle Paul's letter to the Christian communities in Rome, written around 58, so just about 25 years after the death of Jesus. It was his last longest, and in many ways most influential bits of writing. And it is the only letter we have where Paul is writing to strangers. So rather than addressing specific people and issues, Romans is a sort of introduction to Paul's whole theological project. And this particular passage is, according to Marcus Borg, one of the most concise summations of Paul's entire message.

From Romans Chapter 12:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (your whole selves) as a living sacrifice, 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 (the desire) of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect (whole)*

Today is welcome back Sunday. So let's begin -- with a deep breath in... and out... and welcome ourselves back to this holy place and this uncluttered, wide open *present moment wonderful moment* as Buddhist teacher Thich Naht Hahn likes to say. And now, remembering that in "present moment, wonderful moment" we are never alone, especially here in this place where we openly honor the community of saints past, present and future—from this place, of deep and joyful community, let us also welcome our neighbor—Turning first to the left: welcome! and then to the right: welcome! All are welcome here. And it never hurts to practice.

This morning, we welcome especially all those who have been away, newcomers, oldtimers, and those who are just passing through. **We** are made more whole by **your** presence. And of course a special welcome to our returning college students. Whether we realize it or not, we in Shepherdstown, and especially here in the Presbyterian meeting house—we cannot be fully who God intends us to be, without you. So thank you for being here (and a special thanks to Sam/Bethany/Jessica for helping lead worship this morning)

Our welcome – including to students and our outreach to the university are not just random events. This denomination, at its best, is deeply committed to education, to the radical notion of public education, to forming students of all kinds; this is a distinct emphasis of Presbyterian spirituality. It goes all the way back to the beginning and John Calvin, a founding father of this tradition, who promoted the radical notion of universal literacy, all the way back in 16<sup>th</sup> century Geneva.

A second, and related emphasis of this tradition is engagement in the world, a commitment to being healers and wholemakers wherever we may find ourselves. It is precisely in the everyday world, in all its glory and its brokenness, that we encounter the Holy. There is good reason that Presbyterian congregations like this one are filled with civil servants, nurses and yes, teachers. Third, at its best, this tradition is open—open to new ideas, to different religious perspectives (I believe that Calvin was the only religious reformer of his day who did NOT claim to have a lock on truth, and the rest of y'all gonna

burn). And so, we seek to stay open to wisdom wherever it might be found: in science and nature; in art, music, beauty; in community; and in the *practices* of study, prayer, and service.

This is a spirituality very much at home in a university town. And I've had the great privilege, for the last 7 or so years, of taking the perspective of this community over there to the university community through our campus program, Connections. The goal is not, as some might imagine, to form little Presbyterians—that may have been campus ministry of the past. Our purpose is simply to welcome the young people in our midst, and to offer them an alternative way of understanding faith, the possibility of spiritual life, engagement in the world, and community that is inclusive, open, and still rooted in deep Wisdom.

Our Connections program has been made possible by the generous support and encouragement of this wonderful organization called the Westminster Foundation of West Virginia, whose sole purpose is to support a Presbyterian presence on campuses within the mountain state. Westminster funds two full time ministers, one at WVU and one at Marshall—amazing prophetic people—and also supports a diverse handful of other ministries like our congregationally based approach. At a time of relentless budget cutting at all levels of private, public and church life, Westminster Foundation of WV is a minor miracle, and I am delighted that we can offer them a small token of our support in return (through our special offering this morning).

When I meet with the Westminster board, which I do a few times a year on our behalf, when I sit with the smart, creative, compassionate people who volunteer their time to keep this all going—including (in past years) our own Jerry Thomas, and currently Catherine Irwin and Joshua Nolen—I am reminded each and every time why I keep coming back to the Presbyterian tradition of my roots. My own journey has taken me far and wide, in education and in practice, including everything from Jesus people, to decades of aggressively “not spiritual and not religious don't even talk to me about this nonsense” to a seminary degree with Carmelite and Franciscan flavored Roman Catholics. I am a full on spiritual mutt, but I'm always drawn back home. There's something about that commitment to education, fundamental openness to the Spirit wherever she might show up, and dedication to service, to being a compassionate presence in the world—that continue to attract and form me, as they do the life of this community. At our best, we are, as our denomination's motto claims, *semper reformanda*, reformed and always being reformed, which is to say, always subject to the transforming work of the Spirit, the evolutionary power of Love.

And this is precisely what Paul is talking about in our reading today. “Do not be conformed to this world” – meaning, the conventional wisdom of the world around you (NOT earth as opposed to heaven). We're talking materialism, consumerism, individualism and the worship of power; do not be conformed to that. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. And Paul is NOT talking here about pure intellectual activity—that is a bit of OUR conventional wisdom that still needs some transformation. A few years back I saw this very passage quoted (in my view, misquoted) on the marquis of a Presbyterian seminary: “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds” as though transformation is purely intellectual, and available right here in our classrooms. Paul is inviting so much more—“mind” here translates the much larger Greek word *nous*, which really means whole cognitive self—body, mind, spirit, the fullness of human being,

knowing, and loving. Paul is calling for our wholehearted engagement, full bodied trust and simple willingness to be transformed.

In other words: do not be conformed or deformed by the cynical, superficial, materialistic, and violent ethos of our age. Find ways to open your whole self--intellectual, spiritual, emotional—open all that to the renewing presence of the Holy. Pay attention and listen deeply for the invitation of Love—for your life, for our lives, our community, our world. Follow that thread, and trust its unfolding. This is the way to your journey of transformation.

“We are involved in a universe that is in a continual process of transformation.” This was the central claim of our *Painting the Stars* study last spring, a fabulous exploration of the intersection between evolutionary science and evolutionary spirituality. Everything, including us, is created with this capacity to evolve toward ever increasing wholeness, consciousness and love. This fall, we will pick up where that study left off, especially its claim that the faithful of the future will be mystics or nothing at all. What is that all about?? We will ask together in our new Sunday seminar--*Mysticism, Mystics and Contemporary Faith* -- beginning September 12 between services. All are welcome, the more perspectives the better.

We are all on a journey of transformation – individually and communally--whether we know it or not; at its best, it is a journey that is shared--one more important distinctive of Presbyterian spirituality—it is aggressively communal. In this tradition, no private baptisms, no private communion, no private spirituality. As Paul says later in this same passage, we are one body with many members, many gifts, many hearts—many colors, ages, sexualities, spiritualities--everyone belongs; in fact, everyone is needed to draw us toward greater wholeness.

*Welcome* is way more than a friendly gesture. It is a formative spiritual practice, one that we seek to embody communally—all are welcome! and explore individually—everyone and everything belongs, as Richard Rohr likes to say. Great joy and great suffering both are evolutionary forces that can draw us deeper into Love. Our Connections gatherings, by the way, flow directly from this very perspective—we always begin with that deep breath in, deep breath out and welcome ourselves and then each other to a small but spacious, uncluttered moment. Present moment, wonderful moment! And together, we ask: where are you noticing light, life, connection? And where are you experiencing darkness, struggle, disconnection? Where is God in all of that? And what is the invitation to you, to us, here and now? *Welcome* is a practice we engage again and again, so that our hearts, our lives, our communities can become holy places where love can dwell. May this be so.

Sermon Hymn: All Are Welcome

Affirmation: We're all related. We're all one. We all come from the same love, that has found six billion kinds of beauty. We all come from the same breath, that speaks a million different languages. We are all migrants in this world, come from God and going to God. We're all home. We're all one. Wherever you are, whoever you are with, welcome home to your family.” Steve Garnaas Holmes