

Last week we marks began a series of four sermons in which we will look at our church. The observations that were used were taken from the feedback we received on the Conference on the Past as well as feedback on a survey that was given to Session, Deacons and PW leadership.

The first observation was Serving God or Serving Self. *We come to church and church activities weary, rattled, and empty from hectic, out of balance lives. We come with little left to give. We are free to choose in every area of our lives, but what we fail to realize is that our choices then bind us. Often our choices block meaningful participation as the church.*

What is the solution? Decisions need to be made about priorities. What is most important in your life? What does God want, not what you want? Is serving God a priority? Is being with God a priority? Should church be a priority? Your answers will determine the church we will become. This morning we begin the second observation. *We live in a culture of self-centeredness, instant gratification and convenience. "What does it do for me?" shapes how we participate – or choose not to participate – in most activities, including the church. Our behavior often models the culture of self-centeredness, while our witness – to understand ourselves and live as God's people called into community with and for one another – is silent. Also, we are living in a 24/7 world that is constantly bombarding us with messages about who we are, what should be important to us, and what we should be about. For good and for ill, we are being shaped by these messages. What kind of people does our consumer culture want us to be? What kind of people does Christ call us to be?*

Our scripture passage that addresses this observation comes to us from Romans, the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 1 through 5.

*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. Let us pray.*

Karl Marx termed Christianity an "opiate" of the masses, a tool of exploitation. Sigmund Freud called Christianity an illusion, a crutch, a source of guilt and pathologies. Bertrand Russell, 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher taught, "I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of the moral progress in the world."

In the eyes of culture, Christianity. . . Is a crutch; Impedes science; Is a source of bigotry; Causes wars; Contributes to the population explosion. And these messages make us timid in our witness, and reluctant to show that Jesus Christ makes a difference.

Even more powerful are the commercials that bombard us. A Bible Study resource we have been using from the Center for Parish Development notes that "The New York Times has estimated that the average American is exposed to hundreds of ads per day whether through signs, billboards, television, radio or internet. Are commercials effective? Let's take a test. If I was to ask you what were the important events in your life 50 years, 40 years, 30 years ago, you would have to think about it. But if I were to ask you, do you remember...Come alive, come alive, your in the ??? generation. Pepsi; Mmm good. Mmm good. ??? soups are Mmm good. Campbell; NESTLES, Nestles make the very best ??? Chocolate; See the USA, in you ??? America is asking you call. Chevrolet; Only you can prevent ??? Forest fires; Winston tastes good like a ??? should. Cigarette

So what messages bombard us today that influences us? To be truly good you must be thin and look like a model or athlete. To be admired, you must be successful. It is okay to demean people using words like whore, slut, and a whole list of words that I can't say, they would be too offensive. Yes, you have nice things, but are they up-to-date.

Repeated exposure over time to similar messages makes it easy for people to accept them as true, and more importantly, act as though they're true, even when they 'know' the messages are false. Just consider how often television ads are repeated. The companies behind the ads are only too

willing to pay for such repetition. Because it works! Think also political messages, religious tenets, business decision making trends and economic ideas and it becomes obvious how, through simple repetition, the media influence our decisions.

And for the church. Organized religion controls people, manipulates people, and encourages people to hate. It doesn't matter what people believe, truth is relative to each person.

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Serving and following God is no longer the priority. Paul understood this. He writes, "Be careful," in other words, "about the shape to which you conform." "Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

So what does that mean? At the very least it means paying careful attention to the signals we respond. We can, after all, sever the link between stimulus and response. Just because we smell popcorn at the theater doesn't mean that we obligated to buy any. But we walk into a theater and walk to that counter and we order our food. And should we order a double portion of butter? Well sometimes I do but I also often choose not to have popcorn at all. Unless of course, Laura insists and then I do it for her. We are programmed, we eat popcorn in movie theaters. But we can choose how to respond those signals. And we need to pay more careful attention to the choices we are making.

It's hard to see how even the most incredible spiritual experiences can stand much of an influential chance. What we do, matters; What we reward, matters; What we read, matters; How we spend our time, matters; What we indulge, matters; What we choose matters. Why? Because in all those practices and attentions is reflected our conclusions about what is important and good and worth our very self.

Culture bombards us daily with a list. We feel compelled to follow the list. Like the story of frog and toad which I read to the kids. Messages are written in our mind and we feel we need to follow them. The Holy Spirit's work is to erase these messages and rewrite them. With what? The words of scripture. Our list is rewritten with God's list. And when it is rewritten, we serve God and not the lists of culture.

What is the shape to which you are conforming? There are all kinds of forms pressing in on us, hoping to leave an impression. What is leaving its mark on you?

*"Don't be conformed," Paul cautioned, "to this world; rather be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is perfect and acceptable and good." Amen.*