

## **“TOGETHER, ENGAGING THE WORLD”**

Romans 12:1-21

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

“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.” For the first time, this verse persuaded me that God might want something different for me than what the “world” had to offer. It wasn’t long before this verse became the basis for my understanding of the church as countercultural. For the faith community, life is not about the money you make, the position you hold, or the reputation you have. It’s not about family, social class, ethnicity or nationality. The values of the faith contrast with the values of “the world.”

This way of seeing things leads us to associate greed, hate, violence, and personal ambition with the world while claiming humility, love, peace, and sacrifice for the life of faith. So the world uses up earth’s resources and defaces the beauty of the planet we inhabit. The world practices “might makes right.” It promotes the freedom of the individual over the common good and protects the rights of business over the social welfare. Some parts of the faith community have been content to allow the world to go its merry way because they did not belong to “this world.” Heaven was their home.

Jesus’ prayer for the disciples in John 17, that God would keep them safe “in the world,” though they were not “of the world,” encouraged believers to keep separate “from the world.” As valuable as this countercultural emphasis is, there are a couple cautions to keep in mind, the first being that it can discourage engagement with the world. When combined with placing the locus of salvation “beyond this world,” it allows believers to disregard suffering in places and people which they deem as “belonging to the world.” Don’t worry about the earth, God will make a new one. Stay out of politics, God will govern in the new heaven and earth.

This is not usually a problem for us at Westminster because we don’t sharply separate this life from the next life. We understand that “salvation” applies to this life as well, that God cares about what happens today. I mention this problem because I want us to understand that many Christians are exclusively focused on “heaven” in such a way as to abandon the world. And this causes harm. Our problem is different.

We are more likely to mistake values in the world for faith values. Why is this? The church has been around now for two millennia. Over the course of that time, it has shaped and adapted to culture in the world. We are discovering that many of the values taught by Jesus are shared not only by other faiths, but also by many unattached to a particular religion. This is the positive aspect of the church’s engagement with the world. We must acknowledge and have acknowledged for a long time that the church has used power and money to further its own interests to the detriment of others. The crusades, the burning of heretics, the colonization of other lands, and the justification of slavery hardly

reflect the teachings of Jesus. Too often the church has forgotten the character of Jesus in its attempt to “glorify his name.”

“Do not be conformed to the world” was never intended as the sledgehammer with which we condemned the world; it was a caution or a warning not to take our cue from the world, not to imitate others in their drive for success. Paul wasn’t interested in establishing an exclusive church that set boundaries for who was in and who was not. His intent is clear in the second half of the verse: “be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The Christians in Rome were not powerful. Some were slaves. Some were imprisoned. Known Christians would have been held in suspicion. To them it must have seemed that the mighty ruled, often by force; that success was acquired by service to the empire, that influence was bought by wealth. “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” was an invitation to see life differently, to think about life differently, to imagine a new world. Not survival of the fittest, but the beloved community; not material wealth, but spiritual depth; not force of arms, but strength of character; not protecting one’s own, but hospitality for the stranger; not authority over, but partnership with; not indifference to suffering, but compassion for. This is seeing things differently with a new, transformed mind in a way that distinguishes itself from “the world” without taking oneself out of the world. The transformed mind doesn’t segregate itself from the world. It engages the world differently. It seeks out the good and acceptable, and perfect. It bears the desires of God into the world.

The rest of the chapter lays out more specifically what this looks like. Some of these things assume that while not conforming to the world, believers do “engage the world.” In fact we might see this long list of advice as “rules for engagement.” I want to lift up a few of these as relevant for us today, but first I’d like to emphasize two more details from verse two.

The first is that “minds” is plural. Transformation and renewal are communal events. We do it “together.” New ideas don’t just pop into our heads. Something gives rise to them, something we heard, or read, or witnessed. We learn because someone taught us. We grow because someone fed or nurtured us. The body of Christ has many members, each performing a different function. “We are members, one of another,” writes Paul. Just as we belong to God, we belong to each other. Such belonging stimulates transformation and renewal in a way that we could not sustain alone.

Individuals do not discern what is good, acceptable, and perfect in a vacuum. Discerning the will of God is a communal activity. We do it together.

Second, a comment about the word “perfect.” The Greek word here does not mean “without mistake” or “without sin.” It means complete or to make complete in its verbal form. It’s the same word Jesus uses in John’s Gospel when he utters his last word from the cross, *tetelestai*, it is finished. The word has to do with wholeness. Following Jesus is about living the whole life. It is a living out of what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

So Paul offers some counsel to the faith community as they live out their faith together. Several things speak specifically to being together. In addition to the description of the community bringing gifts for the common good. He encourages them to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep, to live in harmony with one another, and my favorite, love one another with mutual affection. It isn't difficult to see how these things strengthen the bonds that hold a faith community together. These are things that we've experienced here, things that keep us coming back.

But they aren't just for us. We carry them into the world. "Let love be genuine," says Paul. He doesn't just mean in our relationships here, but in all our relationships. It's love we take into the world, not judgment. That's why Paul says to bless those who persecute you. Do not curse them. That's why he tells them to refuse to repay evil with evil, but instead to overcome evil with good.

We are to extend hospitality to strangers because the benefits of our life together are not for ourselves alone but for the world as well, a world which the scriptures tell us belongs to God. The renewal of our minds, the transformation brought by faith is for others too.

"Live peaceably with all," he says, "so far as it depends on you," because the world doesn't know yet the things that make for peace. But God intends peace for the world.

"Associate with the lowly," he says, because it hurts God to see the least of these suffer. These are the ones who might need something to eat, something to drink.

In a few weeks, we'll open our doors to the unhoused, provide a place to warm up from the chill of winter, something warm to eat and drink. They're not a group we interact with much, but they matter to God, and hopefully they can enjoy our hospitality, have a little light injected into their day.

This is engaging the world just as much as our attempts to understand and address racism, just as much as our efforts to reduce hunger by sharing in the ministry of loaves and fishes, just as much as the joy we hope to introduce to children of an incarcerated parent with our gifts through angel tree.

We're hoping to increase our capacity for engaging the world when we hire a Communications and Engagement Director. I see this person both strengthening our faith community and helping us discern the good, acceptable and perfect will of God for us.

I see this church focused on building love within and beyond our faith community. That's why I make a financial commitment to this church every year. I love the ministry you do, the way you engage the world together. I love the way you support one another and refuse to close your eyes to the needs of people beyond this community. I love the way you embrace and partner with others doing the same work whether they share our faith or not. I love your openness to the presence and love of God in the most unusual places. I love your determination to carry the love of God into the world. Together, I continue to

pray that we will be able to discern what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God for us in this time and place. Amen.