

August 23, 2020

“Beyond Best In Show”

Romans 12:1-8

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Romans 12:1-8

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.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

It is a sign of the times, perhaps, that I've taken to watching dog shows on TV.

The pandemic has changed us all. It has changed our habits and expanded our horizons and driven us to explore new corners of the programs and channels being pumped steadfastly into our homes. And so that's how it came to be that I was spending time watching people in tuxedos and evening gowns parading dozens of impossibly clean canines around an arena covered with impossibly clean green or purple carpet,

staring at their hind quarters, checking out their teeth – the dogs’ teeth and hind quarters, not the people in tuxedos and evening gowns -- and handing out ribbons.

It’s not that I’d never seen them before – in fact, I specifically remember dog shows being on in the background at holiday dinners, the only acceptable alternative to football games. And my partner and I love dogs ... most especially our own. But I’m not sure we’d ever taken time to really contemplate the fullness of what they are.

Serious, competitive dog shows are not about identifying the cutest dog, or the most beautiful dog, or the most well-behaved dog, or even the best overall dog. Dog shows are about finding the dog who best *conforms* to the standard for its particular breed.

Conformation is about meeting a multipoint list of requirements. So for example, the Dalmation must be between 19 and 23 inches tall at the shoulder, I’m quoting now, “strong and sturdy in bone, but never coarse.” The ears are of moderate size, proportionately wide at the base and gradually tapering to a rounded tip. The top of the skull is flat with a slight vertical furrow. Any color markings other than black or liver are disqualified and spots must be from the size of a dime to the size of a half-dollar. Shyness is a major fault. ... You get the idea.

To win Best of Breed in a dog show, you must be the Dalmatianiest Dalmation. Or the Schnauziest Schnauzer. Or the most Labradorian Lab. Any departure from the standard is penalized, or disqualified.

And to win Best of Show, you have to be a Schnauzier Schnauzer than the Dalmatian is Dalmatiany. You must be the most conformed to what a piece of paper says about it.

You can admire the dogs for their beauty, their flowing fur or their adorable faces. But in fact, what is rewarded is not the dog that is different, but rather the dog that is relentlessly, unwaveringly, exactly and perfectly what someone has said it is supposed to be.

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Who and what a follower of Jesus is supposed to be was very much the talk of the town among the early church gathered in first-century Rome. The faith, even from the days when Jesus still walked the earth, and certainly all the more so, as Paul and other evangelists and apostles carried his message out to the ends of the earth as they knew it, was constantly finding itself in tension with the culture and with the rulers of the lands where the gospel spread.

The Christian Church—though it would be a while before anyone would think of it with such a grand institutional title as that—inherently raised questions of faith vs. culture. Of whether one bent the knee to Caesar or bent the knee to God, of how you lived with neighbor and your conscience when you were pressured to do both.

Paul's letter to the Romans is, in many ways, an extended reflection on living in that tough place between church and state, between faith and culture, between the empire where we must live and the realm we are trying to create. And for all that has changed in the last 2000 years – or for that matter in the last 200 years – or four years ... we're still working together on figuring that out.

Now not to oversimplify ... there's a reason Romans lasts 16 chapters, and there are a few other things that have been written about this, too ... but the word to those early Christians and the word to us often comes to down to this: You've got some choices to make.

When you're living in challenging times ... and we are ... we've got some choices to make, as individuals and frankly, as a church.

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. 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.

Will we be conformed ... Or will we be transformed?

Sometimes with Bible verses, the choices we set up seem really obvious. Duh! You want to say, of course we shouldn't be transformed. But I think it's important for us to realize that conforming wasn't the obviously bad option for those Christians in Rome. You go along to get along. You respect the authority of leaders and save up your credibility to be truly prophetic and brazen on some other day. If you're a person of faith trying to do the right thing and it feels like the winds are shifting against you, conforming may feel like the right way to go, at least for a while.

And besides, there's plenty about how we have taught and lived the faith in all those other parts of the Bible ... in all those other Sunday School classes and church confessions and moral codes ... that speaks pretty clearly about the need to conform, isn't there? Who among us has not at some point thought that if we just live this way, or keep that thought to ourselves, or restrain that impulse, or believe that one key belief – you know, if we make sure our spots are between dime-sized and half-dollar sized, if we just keep our height between 19 and 23 inches at the shoulder – then we will be living right. Then, we will be doing God's will. Then we will be good, and acceptable, and perfect.

It's not such an easy question, really: Be conformed, or be transformed?

Conformation – that prized quality of award-winning canines – is, I think, our go-to, default option. It is often what we recognize as excellence. But it isn't the answer this scripture gives us.

The answer given in scripture is not conformation ... but transformation. These verses speak of a living sacrifice—an interesting choice of words, taking a religious ritual but giving it new meaning. Proclaiming an act of worship that is not physical but spiritual. It is an instruction, really NOT

to do things by the book, not to make our focus falling in line, but rather to open ourselves to the new thing God might do through us. To allow our mind to be renewed to discern something different. To believe that sliding easily into the present cultural moment, the present expectation of prescribed obedience is NOT the safe way, but the one that truly puts us at risk. To believe that trust-filled openness to a surprising but Holy Spirit is the only way truly to live.

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So how does that happen? How do we get there?

Back when I was a pastor in a church, believe it or not, one of my favorite things to do was to sit with the church Nominating Committee. That's the group that recruits and puts forward people to serve as elders and deacons and sometimes other roles in the church. I'm aware, friends that some of you listening have been on Nominating Committees for your own church, or maybe your presbytery ... and it may or may not be the thing you've thought of as your favorite anything...

But here's what I love. Taking a moment to appreciate the lives of my partners on this journey as disciples and asking about each one: What are their gifts? How has God blessed them? What's the best way for them to serve? I can't think of any more important work of a pastor or really for any person trying to have an impact in other people's lives, than to help people cultivate who they are and who they can be ... not to fill some slot we need filled, or check off some box, but to make the whole system go because each person has truly found their place.

I think that's sort of what Paul meant when he went right on in these verses to talk about the church as one body, with many parts. And to lift up those different parts, each for how it can shine. The teacher in teaching. The giver in generosity. The caregiver in cheerfulness.

What could be more renewing of one's mind than open oneself to do the thing, expected or not, in which we can thrive?

We haven't always done this in the church – let's be honest. We've signed people up for the thing we need or expect them to do, not for what they've been called to do, equipped to do, blessed to do. Sometimes, of course, we've ignored people's gifts to tell them what they can't do.

But frankly, I'm more interested today not in the ways the church has chosen conformation over transformation – but in the ways we've done it to ourselves. We've snapped ourselves in to the structure of what to do and not do, rather than expanding our vision of mission and ministry and the places we might reach out with joy and compassion, skill and grace.

When we ourselves stop thinking of our life of discipleship as doing the things that are required or expected and instead see it as living into something “renewing,” something that opens our “mind” ... well that ... and not conforming ... is what Romans 12 calls perfect.

In this list of gifts and fulfillment we see what Paul Achtemeier called “the structuring effects of grace.” God's abundance to us is so generous, and the gifts so plentiful, that the work of justice and love was accomplished – every part of it -- by each of not meeting some old expectation, but all of us together living into something new. It is an outcome surprisingly orderly and surprisingly freeing, liberating, as we all find our place, our voice, our calling, our responsibilities. Each of us heard and seen for who we are and what we are.

Where is your joy and passion? How are you making that your life of faith?

What has God given you? How might that be given again, given away for the sake of this world in need?

What living sacrifice might you offer, that we might all see the good?

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Suffice it to say that 2020 has been a rough year – for the church, for the nation, for many of us in our own lives and families. Maybe we've lost loved ones, or lost stability, or lost a sense of who we are. If only the worst outcome of this year were really just watching too many dog shows on TV.

But it is precisely at such a moment as this for which Paul's words were written. Here is the antidote to our malaise, our path forward not merely for the choices we will make individually and the shape of the community that we become when this moment of challenge is past.

Do not be conformed to the world, friends, but be transformed by the Spirit's renewing of your minds. That is what is good and acceptable and perfect. May it be so.