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Romans 12

## NONCONFORMISTS

Here we sit today, a rather respectable group of people. Any review of this crowd would determine us to be, generally speaking, a group that conforms to society's expectations of its citizens. Our forms of dress, our traditions and behaviors, our personal goals, our daily habits of living, our civic engagement all reflect people who fit in with society, with its rules and values and traditions. And yet, today we are told something startling from our Christian faith. We are told: do not conform to this world.

The Apostle Paul challenges us Christians to undertake a life and a lifestyle that is decidedly nonconformist. He writes to the Roman Christians in our reading today, "I appeal to you brothers and sisters . . . do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." And then he goes on to detail many very challenging ways in which we Christians should live as nonconformists in our world. He begins by telling us not to think too highly of ourselves--a direct challenge to our era today in which all too many people live as if the world revolved around them. Instead of a misguided concept of individualism which elevates the individual, Paul directs our attention to understanding the individual as part of a community. What a radical notion for us in our society today which places so much emphasis on the individual's wants and desires and rights.

Paul then goes on to encourage other nonconformist ideas--like blessing people who persecute you, not seeking revenge, offering help and assistance to strangers. And then most astonishing, perhaps, are his instructions about how to behave toward our enemies: feed them, he

tells us, give them something to drink if they are in need. Care about their welfare. And he ends by saying, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

All of these teachings, of course, fly in the face of what our culture at large embraces-- where we use violence to combat violence, where we kill and seek revenge, where we hate our enemies and wish them harm, where we reserve our compassion for people we know or who are like us and grow suspicious of strangers. Paul's teachings were unconventional ideas when he first wrote them and they surely are still today.

Paul got these crazy nonconformist notions from none other than Jesus himself. Jesus taught nonconformity. Love your enemies, Jesus taught. Forgive seventy times seven. Do unto the least of these, he taught when instructing his followers to care about the most overlooked and undervalued people in society. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a radical call to love an enemy and to consider all people as one's neighbor. The Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches a message of radical forgiveness and mercy. Jesus not only taught a nonconformist message, he *lived* as a nonconformist: socializing with outcasts, eating with people others despised, touching the sick and diseased in healing love and compassion, talking with women, taking time for children, washing his followers' feet like a servant, living in humility instead of climbing the social ladder of success and power. And then sacrificing himself for others. Everything about the Christian gospel, as we see revealed in Jesus, is an nonconformist message.

But down through the centuries, we Christians have had a hard time embracing this mandate to nonconformity. Instead of living out a different ethic, Christians have all too often come to reflect their society and its values. We have adopted the mindsets, the behaviors, the ethics of the prevailing culture. But fortunately, every once in a while, there emerges a voice

that recalls for us the life-giving message of our Savior and the gospel's call to live and think differently.

This past week we honored one of those rare voices. We recall Martin Luther King, Jr. as a great leader for civil rights. But we sometimes overlook that he was also a pastor and a deeply believing Christian. And the very foundations of the civil rights movement he led were rooted in his Christian faith and in the nonconformist message of Jesus.

King wrote that "Every true Christian is a citizen of two worlds, the world of time and the world of eternity." Think about that notion of our being citizens of two worlds: this earthly world around us and then the realm of God, the kingdom of God. King noted that as Christians, "we are, paradoxically, in the world and yet not of the world." He added that "As Christians we must never surrender our supreme loyalty to any time-bound custom or earth-bound idea, for at the heart of our universe is a higher reality--God and his kingdom of love--to which we must be conformed."

Christians are then to be conformed to God's realm of love not to this earthly world and its values. But a great many of the Christians King spoke to in his lifetime all too often mirrored the world they lived in rather than the way of Christ. King spoke about these individuals as being thermometers who "record or register the temperature of majority opinion" rather than living as "thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society." The same is true of many Christians today who wear the label "Christian" but who embrace policies that discriminate against the weak, give in to the consumeristic values of our times, adopt a rhetoric of hate or intolerance toward people who are different, and prize the acquisition of wealth. In living this way, Christians have become thermometers who registering the temperature of the world rather than thermostats who regulate that temperature.

Martin Luther King did not promote the idea of Christian nonconformity just for the sake of nonconformity. We've all met those people in our lives who like to rattle the cage and stir things up through their nonconformity to the traditions and values of their community. Adolescents will sometimes engage in this kind of behavior in an effort to rebel or separate from the adults in their lives. Rather, the nonconformity preached by Jesus and embraced by the Apostle Paul and then by MLK was rooted in the idea of transformation. Transformation was the goal of this nonconformity. "Do not be conformed to this world," wrote Paul, "but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Transformation of the heart and mind and soul was the goal. The Christian mandate to not conform to this world can be distilled down to what King referred to as Jesus' love ethic. It's all about love. Christians are called to be nonconformists in serving the ethic of love because love is what transforms.

Now, this mandate to love is not to be confused with liking. King knew he could never like the people who bombed his home or who beat civil rights protesters and yelled hateful things at them. But Jesus never told us to like our enemies. Liking involves a sentiment. But Jesus' ethic of love is rooted in what King referred to as "the creative, redemptive, goodwill" for all people. King deeply believed in Christ's mandate to love as a powerful tool for transformation.

And so the civil rights movement was rooted in a philosophy of non-violent resistance. It was rooted in the belief that we must love our enemy because doing so honors the presence of God in them, and doing so has the potential to transform them, and doing so saves us from becoming like our enemy. It is important to understand that this call to love our enemy was never meant to be passive or weak. King understood that loving one's enemy entailed actively resisting the evil they were doing. Evil and wrong and injustice must be resisted--because love of the one doing the evil requires this as well as love of the one suffering the evil requires this.

King embraced the Christian principle taught by Jesus that love is the tool for transformation. He wrote that "Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it."

We are living in days that feel dark and foreboding to many of us. Hatred seems to abound in places around the world and in our own land. There are deep divisions. There are people who feel afraid. There is rhetoric of intolerance and hostility. There are bombings and attacks that leave everyone uneasy and fearful. Back in 1963, King wrote words which seem just as relevant to us today when he said, "In these days of worldwide confusion, there is a dire need for men and women who will courageously do battle for truth."

The truth of God does not conform to the truths of this world. Love does not conform to the truths embraced by this world. But it is this love that can save us and our world.

Friends, how might we rise up to be the nonconformists Christ calls us to be? How might you love in a nonconformist way, forgive in a nonconformist way, right a wrong, extend compassion, help a stranger, notice the one who is overlooked in ways that are noticeably different than the prevailing values of our time? In his day and in his time, Martin Luther King, Jr. showed us the transformative power that can be found in Christ's ethic of love. Now it is our day and our time. It is our time to find the strength needed to love.

*all citations from Strength to Love, Martin Luther King, Jr.*