

## Do Not Be Conformed Romans 12:1-8

It's peculiar how one person can have a bad idea, and pretty soon others follow. We all think everyone ought to obey the law, but if you're in the middle of traffic and everyone's breaking the speed limit by ten miles per hour, the odds are we will too. If a lie, or a hurtful truth, about a celebrity or politician is spoken on television or at the coffee shop, others begin to repeat it. Perhaps you have too.

It's like something John Muir, the self-made naturalist, wrote in his diary the first summer he spent in the Yosemite wilderness while traveling with a shepherd and a great flock of sheep. While Muir had tremendous admiration for the wildlife he encountered, he noted wryly in his book, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, "A sheep can hardly be called an animal: an entire flock is required to make one foolish individual" (p. 62).

Or like the comic playwright Menander once said (which was later quoted by St. Paul (1 Corinthians 15:33), "Bad company ruins good morals." That's not only a pithy saying; it's also good science.

There's a branch of mathematics known as information cascade theory that simply states that in the company of folks making bad choices, people will do the same even when they know better. Bad choices are contagious. Cascade theory demonstrates mathematically that in bad company the odds are good that we'll be stampeded to share the opinion off fools.

One sees this in the hysteria that follows a national trauma.

The real danger of World War II led Americans astray in the hysterical act of herding loyal Japanese Americans into detention centers. Americans traumatized (rightfully so) by 9/11 came to believe Iraq was not only the source of terror but also posed a nuclear threat. Sometimes the sky is really falling. Sometimes it's just Chicken Little.

The very long mathematical algorithm that undergirds the theory proves that the answer to your mother's plea, "If all your friends jumped off the bridge, will you jump too?" is "Yes!"

Writing to the Romans, and to all Christians, St. Paul pleads with us to answer "No!"

One of the reasons St. Paul wrote to the Romans was because of pressure to conform to different cultural values. Jewish Christians encouraged Gentile Christians to conform to their cultural practices. Roman society, that was strictly stratified with regard to self-segregation of slave and free, rich and poor, male and female, along with other categories, pressured Christians to separate along the same lines.

But the apostle has been encouraging the believers in this most cosmopolitan of cities to create one body of Christ by combining their God-given individuality, not negating it. So in this passage he invites all of us to take a good look at ourselves.

On the one hand he asks us all "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Rom12:3).

His central theme, however, is a flat warning against giving into the cascade. "Do not be conformed," he writes, "to this age." Although sometimes translated "world," the word refers to the mindset of the times. Instead, he tells us all to be transformed, changed, and metamorphosed "by the renewing of your minds," so that we might discern God's perfect will (12:2).

We are not to think of ourselves, St. Paul writes, "more highly than you ought." And what better example do we have of this than Jesus himself? In another letter, written to the church at Philippi, St. Paul tells us that Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to be taken advantage of, but humbled himself obediently to the cross.

Sometimes our society gives lip service to the idea of individuality, but the political sphere, the advertising circles, the peer pressure that seems ingrained in the structure of every age group, the covenants that set standards in housing developments, the community standards when it comes to something as simple as what colors you may paint your home, in these and many other ways there is intense pressure to conform.

It can become difficult to avoid conforming. When a style takes hold, whether it be the length of men's pants or the style of women's blouses, it can be almost impossible to find something dissenting for sale.

Perhaps we should expect this in society at large. But in our congregations there can be pressure to conform as well. The apostle Paul encouraged diversity in practice. He chose to practice his Jewish cultural customs, but insisted that Christians from the Roman world maintain their practices, and he encouraged the Celts of Galatia, who conformed neither to the Jewish or Roman standards, to remain the people they were when they first

accepted the gospel. He expected that all would accept Jesus Christ as Lord, as Jesus has accepted us. But beyond that he spoke out against those, even apostles as respected as St. Peter, who succumbed to peer pressure to become cookie-cutter Christians.

So should we, in our congregations, demand that all Christians dress alike, eat the same foods, belong to the same political parties, speak the same language, and enjoy the same music? On the contrary. In this passage from Romans, St. Paul points to the many gifts given to us, and then deliberately uses the word we translate as members, because that word, in the English language, refers not to interchangeable units, but the different parts of the body.

Listing some of the gifts shared by people - prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and compassion - he insists all are necessary to our corporate well-being.

This grace of difference, granted to us, and granted by us to each other, is what St. Paul calls our "spiritual worship," and without it, we are not truly God's people.

We are all needed in the body of Christ. We are all welcome.

In contrast to a world that attempts to make us conform to impossible standards of self-worth, we are loved and welcomed as we are, because that is how God made us. We bring our weaknesses and strengths and, most of all, our gifts to the work of Jesus Christ. We are transformed, so that we no longer look at God and each other, as the world does.

Rather than an information cascade theory, that drags us and draws us into false conclusions, we encounter a great, overwhelming tidal wave of love, which transforms us and the landscape of church to one of love, acceptance, salvation, and peace. So may it be with us. Alleluia. Amen.