



Be Not Conformed – Matthew 17:1-8, Romans 12:1-18

Eric C. Smith to First Parish Church, Brunswick – March 6, 2011

On the Installation of The Rev. Geoffrey Parker as Associate Pastor and Teacher

There is a neighboring land to the west of here, a harsh but magnificent land of rough valleys cut through snowcapped mountains. The landscape has been reshaped and transformed repeatedly on a scale that we cannot imagine. The first people of this land, as well as our own, were called the People of the Dawn Land, the Wabanaki. They inhabited the land even as the glaciers receded, and they inhabit it still. But millennia after the Wabanaki arrived, a new people came to this land who assumed everything they saw now had always been just so. They marveled at the peaks and valleys, the jagged ledges carved out by forces so ancient and powerful they could only be attributed to the ultimate Creator.

One day, some of the new people looked up and saw, cut from the face of a mountain, the face of a man. Rocks had fallen away from a series of ledges to reveal the profile of an old man. (Well, if you stood in just the right place and used your imagination.) They saw this face and marveled at the wonder of it. Some of them even took it as a sign from God. Perhaps a bit too literally. One of the great leaders of the land even proclaimed that was in fact like a shingle hung outside God's workshop, just as "shoe makers hang out a gigantic shoe... God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that [here] he makes men."

This sign was a permanent reminder of what it meant to be from this land of granite: to persevere through all time, just like this great stone face. They put the face on their coins and their road signs, and anything else that would stay still long enough to have the face added to it.

But then something quite unexpected happened. Just a hundred years after the face was first noticed, someone noticed something else. A crack – several cracks in fact that were getting bigger. Something had to be done. God may have made the sign, but now it was the people who knew they had to preserve it the way it had always been and protect it from whatever was damaging it.

So they filled the cracks – with concrete, year after year to keep the water out and the ice from expanding. They made it a crime to damage or deface the face. But the cracks kept coming. So they drilled holes and used enormous bolts to hold the face together. But it grew less and less stable. So they used cables to hold the ledges together and bound them tighter and tighter. They held this rock face together so well, so tightly, that finally the whole thing fell crashing down off the mountain.

The same persistent forces that had created this wonder piece by piece had simply continued in their course. The people had looked up and marveled. But they mistook the gift, the miracle of the moment, for something that had always been and would always be. Somehow the forces that brought this *now* into being are creative and wondrous, but when those same forces continue to change the landscape they are seen as destructive and must be resisted or restrained. The great stone face of the Old Man on the Mountain was visible for merely a moment in the scope of geologic time, prolonged slightly by these monumental efforts. But will those who bound themselves so tightly to that moment have the courage to keep looking for what shapes, faces, or other parts of the body are still to be revealed?

We hear a similar story, in a much shorter timeframe, in the gospel lesson most of us heard this morning, the story of the transfiguration. Jesus brings his friends up to the mountain and there they experience a holy moment. They see with their own eyes Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah,

and they want the moment to last, so they propose building structures for the three of them to say and talk forever. But there are greater miracles to be revealed, and just then Jesus is transfigured, transformed in their midst, into a glowing vision with whom God is well pleased and says, “Listen to him!” But this transformation is too overwhelming, and the disciples cower and fall down. Until Jesus says – as he always says when the disciples are scared, or discouraged, or withdraw – be not afraid. When they look up, Matthew says, they see only Jesus, alone.

They see Jesus who says be not afraid, there is more transformation to come, but not just in me, in you also, and not just here on the mountain, but down in the valleys of peoples lives. Let’s go. This moment was a big moment, but let’s not talk about it anymore, we’re moving on.

Paul says much the same thing in his letter to the Romans, but instead of be not afraid he says “be not conformed.”

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.

I believe that when Paul is saying do not be conformed to this world, he is also saying be not conformed to this time. Do not believe that all you see and all you have experienced is all that there is or will be. There is more to be revealed, and in order for it to be revealed everything you know must change, including you, in order to discern the will of God.

To discern. To perceive. To recognize. Paul says the will of God is not carved out in an eternal sign on the side of a mountain for all to see. Nor can it be handed down unchanged across all generations. It must be discerned. By us. Through our own transformation and renewal. And transformation is always sacrificial. The sacrifice of what is now for the promise of what is to come.

We gather here today on this august occasion as people who know both the promise of new life yet to be revealed and a nearly irresistible resistance to change. We are a Pilgrim people who know the passion of striking out on a new path away from oppressive domination; and also the pain of clinging too fiercely to that path when yet more light from God’s holy word threatens our current understanding. We are a people who know the pride of being in the center of town, with the tallest, most brightly lit steeple; and also the realization of being marginalized as more and more people drive by – or around – us than walk through our doors. We know the satisfaction of completing a profile and a search process, having stated clearly and concisely who we are and how we understand our ministry; and also the tension of living out our call together as a diverse and changing community.

Our dearly departed brother Rev. Peter Gomes said that while Jesus “likes to turn things upside down,” most churches today are “engines for preserving the status quo.”

The forces that created our landscape are still at work. But we are tempted to see our past as a creative prologue and the future as a destructive force that must be resisted and repelled. The changes reshaping our social and economic and religious landscape cannot be deterred. Are we open to discerning what this transformation means for us and our church? Or are we sealing those cracks with concrete, bolting and binding ourselves to the status quo? Will we use our prophetic imagination to be agents of transformation in our world toward the vision of a just and sustainable community? Or will we busy ourselves with the preservation of what is passing away.

Be not conformed to this world, Paul says. When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke in this very room he called this refusal to conform a “creative maladjustment.” He said he was proud to be maladjusted, and that he never intended to adjust himself to the injustices of this world, or to “economic realities that take necessities from the many to provide luxuries to the few.”

Are we so creatively maladjusted? Or have we conformed to a world where we accept that basic necessities are afforded people based on nationality, race, and immigration status, rather than their inherent worth and dignity as human beings? Have we conformed to a world that can only satisfy its thirst for wealth and personal gain through the exploitation of the earth, its resources, and its people? Have we conformed to a world in which any topic politicized by pundits or by media hyperbole is no longer an issue for the church, as if Jesus had nothing to say about the distribution of wealth, or the provision of food in the community, or justice for the poor and oppressed? Have we conformed to a world where we vilify those with whom we disagree rather than seeking common ground, or seal out controversy for fear of the tension and cracks it might expose within our covenanted relationships?

It would seem that here at First Parish Church in Brunswick, the answer to these questions is, “no,” at least in part because you have searched yourselves and called Geoffrey Parker as your pastor and teacher. You have invited deep questioning. You have invited the opening of cracks through which the Spirit can move among you. You have invited honest discernment of the will of God in this time and in this place. You may even have invited transformation and renewal. I pray that it will be so for First Parish, for the Cumberland Association, for the Maine Conference, for the United Church of Christ, and for the Church universal.

Be not conformed, Paul says. Reject the world’s ideas of uniformity and recognize the complexity of the body. Rebuff the world’s need for ranked superiority and welcome the diversity of gifts for ministry and teaching, giving and leading, empathy and compassion. Shake the world’s obsession with self-promotion, and outdo each other in honoring one another. Repudiate the world’s call for retaliation and bless those who curse you. Cast off the world’s self-centered orientation and share in the pain and joy of others. Live in peace.

This is the radical, sacrificial transformation offered and required of us in order that we might recognize the way into God’s unfolding future.

Walter Bruegermann writes “The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away, by the grace of God.” This is not news we want to hear. But it is, I believe, deeply good news.

We can feel the ground rumbling beneath us. The voice from the rumbling says, “Listen to Jesus.” And Jesus says, “Be not afraid.” We’re moving on. Let’s go.