

**Romans 12:2** – *“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.”*

### The Thorns of Conformity

Sometimes I wonder what Martin Luther King, Jr. must think of the way his legacy has been used in the twenty-first century. Publicly we sing his praises, admire his courage and idolize him. But he also gets stripped of his message. We all know “I have a dream” and his touching vision for a peaceful, tolerant and loving future, but we are less familiar with his deep social commentary and criticism. His opposition to the injustice of segregation is well known, but less known is his opposition to materialism and the military-industrial complex. I think this is because if we limit Rev. King’s message to segregation, we can pat ourselves on the backs a bit. We have indeed come a long way from the ‘50s when it comes to civil rights. The historical reality is that racial minorities and women have more legal rights and more social mobility than ever before in this country. We do have a black president, now, after all. But there is a vicious irony in naming a virtually all-black school, underserved and plagued by poverty, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary. Or with naming a street in a black ghetto overrun by crime MLK Boulevard. The reason these tributes fail is because this is not yet society that bears his name or fits his vision. And his vision is not just one of racial harmony. It is one of peace, one where people value love and neighbor more than power and possessions. The sad truth is that the core of MLK’s message is not only unrealized but unheard. It’s a message that echoes the Apostle Paul: “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

If this were not my first Sunday as pastor, I would have spared you my homiletic commentary and simply read one of Dr. King’s sermons for you on MLK weekend. For it is important not to forget that Dr. King was also Rev. King and that this is a man who served God and preached! His model for ministry and civic engagement was influenced most by the Early Christians and in particular the Apostle Paul. Some of you have shared with me a tenuous relationship with Paul, because often fundamentalist Christians use portions of his epistles to ground their oppressive views toward women and homosexuality. But a three-dimensional understanding of Paul does not reveal a close-minded, judgmental or callous man. In fact, King’s modeling of Paul is pretty accurate – a person with a sense of conviction and urgency, concerned with bringing about justice through non-violence and expressing love for others. Romans 12 happens to be my favorite passage of the entire Bible, in part because of today’s message of non-conformity, but also because it informs last Sunday’s message about the priesthood of all believers comprising the body of Christ alive in the world. Rev. King also preached a sermon on Romans 12.2, one he titled “Transformed Nonconformist.”

In that sermon King states that “We as Christians are commanded to live differently. We are called to be people of conviction and not conformity, people of moral nobility and not social respectability. We are called to a higher loyalty, to a more excellent way.” The more excellent way Rev. King preaches about it the path of conviction over comfort, one where conformity is always challenged by the transformative power Christ’s example.

In the parable of the sower Jesus tells us about a seed that falls among the thorns, thorns which represent conformity and the lure of wealth, thorns which strangled and choke the sprouting plant. Only God knows how many souls have been lost this way, how much potential has been destroyed by materialism, but I have a feeling here in Murrieta, here in the American society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the thorns of conformity are the biggest danger of all. I moved to Murrieta this month and am already falling in love with the place. As a new comer and it may not be my place to offer criticism, but the reality is the “Inland Empire” is an empire based in part upon the sprawl of materialism and conformity. Development in many cases has been fueled by people’s desire to have bigger homes, more privacy and removal from the ugly side of urban living – poverty and crime. Murrieta is ranked the second safest city in America and I know it comes in part from engagement with and investment in the community, but I cannot help but wonder how much of it comes from fleeing social injustice rather than confronting and transforming it.

Just this week Reverend J.T. Greenleaf from the Methodist church down the road was telling me about homeless people squatting out in the hills behind this community. The only time he sees them is when representatives of the community come to his food pantry, which this church supports. Here in the Valley, we must ask ourselves if the mountains on either side of us are not only beautiful examples of God’s creation, but a wall and a barrier we use to make this one giant gated community. Because as long as we cherish the privacy and comfort of this place and isolate ourselves from our neighbors outside the walls, this will be a valley of thorns. It will be a place that lulls you into the complacency of the status quo, a place that chokes off spiritual growth, a place that demands conformity.

And churches. Churches. Far too often they abandon any attempt to be transformative and simply become guardians of the status quo and enforcers of the social norm. In the same sermon, King had some things to say about the churches of his time which remain far too true today: “The church is called to be the moral guardian of the community, yet it is so often the preserver of that which is immoral and unethical. The church is called to take a stand against social evils, but it so often remains silent behind the isolated security of stained glass windows. The church is called to lead men to the highway of brotherhood and summon them to rise above the narrow confines of race and class, but it is so often found comforting men in their prejudices.” I’m sure many of you find these words, although written in 1963, relevant to today’s situation here in Southern California. The battle over Proposition 8 revealed exactly how entrenched some churches are in preserving the status quo and giving not just comfort but theological sanction to discrimination. My biggest fear as a minister is that my ideals will fade and that I will become a leader of a church of this very nature.

But that, my brothers and sisters, is why I specifically sought a community like yours. This is not a community of conformity, and this is not a community that is afraid to take a stand for justice. We don’t even have stained glass windows to hide behind! Now, I’m sure many of you don’t see yourself as counter-cultural, but I assure you this is a community that breaks down negative preconceptions of Christianity. This is a community willing to listen to the still speaking God, full of people from all walks of life who are opening their minds so that they can be transformed, so that they can discern the will of God, what is good and what is perfect.

And if we're faithful in this task, in renewing our minds and refusing to allow the thorns of conformity to choke our spirit and smother the voice of a living God, then it doesn't matter if we're a minority. It doesn't matter if we're outnumbered. We may find ourselves sandwiched between fundamentalists using the same God to legitimate injustice on one end or secular materialists on the other who are singularly focused on upgrading their lifestyle to the next level of comfort. We may see some empty chairs next to us, and we may have to struggle to establish ourselves in a community that doesn't share our values. But you know what, that's not a bad place to be in my book.

I know that Pastor Brian has referred to this congregation as a "Mighty Mouse" congregation, capable of doing so much more than its size would suggest. I, like all of you, want to grow this community and share our spiritual home with those who need it. But this will not and can not come through conformity or compromise of our convictions. If we are going to be able to do God's work in this community, it will be by reconnecting with some of the nonconformity found in our tradition. King tells his church that "We need to recapture something that the early Christians had. They went out aglow with a radical gospel. They were nonconformists in the truest sense of the word. They never allowed their actions to be shaped by the mundane patterns of this world. They were willing to sacrifice fame or fortune or life itself for a cause they knew was right. They were quantitatively small but qualitatively big."

Strength, then, is not about numbers, nor is it about money. This may be where worldly power lies, but the transformative power of God comes from faithfulness, dedication and courage in love. Not from a checkbook or a barrel of a gun, but from the heart. After all, one disciple is far more valuable than a legion of conformists, and God's work is seldom done by the masses. King proclaims in his sermon, "If our world is to be saved from its pending doom it will come not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority."

The fierce urgency of now, as Dr. King would put it, is the epidemic of poverty that oppresses the vast majority of souls on this planet, a world where half the population lives on the equivalent of 2 dollars or less per day. And while I hope and pray for a day when concern for the poor and the environment we all share is typical, I remain grateful that there are true nonconformists addressing these challenges daily, and uplifted knowing that God can work powerfully through them.

Few weeks can demonstrate this fact better than this one. There are two women who go to the church I used to serve, First Church Somerville, who are excellent examples of transformed nonconformists, women who inspire my ministry. When the massive earthquake in Haiti claimed the lives of thousands and dealt a debilitating blow to an already dysfunctional infrastructure, both of them had resources at their fingertips to share with me and their other sisters and brothers in Christ on how we could help. They were able to do this because they are Christians who are already in action, they are already responding to the daily catastrophe of injustice and global inhumanity. When many of us are jarred from comfort and complacency by haunting images on newscasts, it is those who were never comfortable in the first place who are able to provide the leadership we need.

It has been truly touching to see how we can be brought together in compassion and action for people in need. This Sunday we are taking a special collection for Haiti

and in doing so are joining with countless sisters and brothers across the world, whether they are catholic, evangelical or mainline. Times like these give our differences perspective and show how much unite us. They also show that the lines of compassion do not fall along Republican and Democrat, Protestant or Catholic, Christian or Agnostic. The line is love for neighbor or love for comfort; those who are willing to give generously of themselves and those who would rather hoard their energy and possessions for self-advancement.

I wonder if those who have been spurred by the very Earth itself shaking into action this week to help strangers from another land will come into a new way life, a life that forsakes comfort for love, one with loyalty to what Dr. King calls the more excellent way, or whether the thorns of conformity will creep their way back into our lives and cut us off from a life transformed. I pray that we remain vigilant and concerned, but even if as a society we return to the stasis of the status quo, take heart. God can do great things with a small number of transformed nonconformists, as Rev. King and his legacy remind us so vividly. Please do enjoy the holiday tomorrow and consider joining the national day of service that honors the memory of Rev. King.

AMEN.