

According to the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, **imperial power** is "the creation and/or maintenance of an unequal economic, cultural, and territorial relationship, usually between states...based on domination and subordination." The key words, there, I think, are *domination and subordination*. To achieve their goals, empires demand unwavering conformity to their laws, norms, and values. They suppress dissent and debate; so you tend to see a lot of bumper stickers that say things like: "my country, right or wrong!"

So when St. Paul appeals to those Christians living in first-century Rome and says to them: "*do not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of your minds,*" he isn't making an abstract theological statement. He is saying something very radical and counter-cultural as he makes his *appeal* to these brothers and sisters who are living in the "belly of the beast," as it were. He reminds them that even though they live in Rome, they are still "in Christ" and therefore answer to a higher authority. As they seek to live their faith, they need to resist the dominating and subordinating power of conformity and open themselves up to the liberating and freeing transformational power of God's Holy Spirit.

Paul appeals to them to keep Christ, not Caesar, at the center of their lives and he implores them to remember when they say that "Jesus is Lord" that they are making a political statement. All of the dominant cultural messages of the imperial Roman world insisted that Caesar was lord. If you wanted to get ahead and to fit in, you needed to play by Caesar's rules. You could do what you wanted on the weekends, say your prayers to whatever god you wanted to, if it turned out that you had a little bit left over at the end of the week—just be sure to keep it private and spiritual and compartmentalized.

What exactly is it that Paul hopes these Christians in Rome will be transformed into? *Into people who can discern the will of God*. Into people who know the truth, and that truth sets them free. Into people who can figure out to whom they really belong and for what purpose; and then to live into that reality, not just on Sunday mornings but 24:7, 365 days a year, one day at a time.

In July, I read a novel called *The Help*, which has just been made into a film. I've not seen the film but I've seen the political criticism it's been getting; even so, I have to say I enjoyed the book. For those who don't know, the story takes place in the south in the 1960s Mississippi, at the dawn of the Civil Rights movement. In many ways the Jim Crow south functioned in the same way that imperial power does: domination and subordination of black people required white people to conform to the status quo. The whole system depended upon being "conformed to that world" and when that happens, you get locked into a closed-system. The only way to break out of such a closed-system is for some kind of internal transformation to happen, which then allows you to see what in fact would seem obvious to any sane person. Only then can one truly "discern the will of God."

How could any preacher ever have ever stood up, in the name of Christ, and preached a sermon purportedly based on the authority of Scripture, and concluded that segregation was a good thing

and more than that, that it was “the will of God?” And yet, as you know, there were countless sermons preached with passion and vehemence and certitude that did just that, defending Jim Crow as divinely mandated. When we are conformed to this world, we begin to use the Gospel to affirm what already is, what everybody “knows” to be true. We make the gospel fit into the culture’s norms, rather than allowing the gospel to open our eyes and ears and hearts...so that Christ can make all things new.

No Christian is ever immune from that danger. We don’t live in first-century Rome or in Mississippi in the early 1960s; you and I are called to be a light to *this* time and place, to be salt and yeast in Worcester County in these early years of the third millennium. But each new generation of Christians must ask the very same hard questions that Paul is raising in Romans 12: Where does your allegiance really lie? Where do you put your trust—not when you are sitting in this room, but as you live your life? In money? Family? Nation? The Democratic Party or the Republican Party? Tea Party or Teacher’s Union? Fox News or MSNBC? Who shapes your values? Who wants you to conform and fit in?

“I appeal to you brothers and sisters...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...” Paul doesn’t coerce us because, unlike imperial power, authentic faith is never coercive. When faith does become manipulative and demands conformity, it is no longer truly faith, but a cult. So Paul invites those Christians in Rome and us as we gather here today, of our own free will, to *present our bodies* to God. Not just some segmented part of our spiritual selves, not that little piece of us that we bring to Church: but our whole selves, our souls and bodies...to God. *Present yourself as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...*

Sacrifice. What a strange word. It makes us think of Old Testament people cutting birds in half and offering dead animals, as if burning flesh could atone for sin, as if God could be made happy with a slaughtered lamb. It seems so distant from our lives, so bizarre. We do well to remember that the prophets wrestled with this notion, too; and they said that the sacrifice God wanted was a broken and contrite heart.

Sacrifice reminds us of the Lamb of God taking away the sins of the world by dying on a cross. And we speak of soldiers who lay down their lives for others. More metaphorically, we speak of parents who sacrifice their summer vacations so that their kids can go off to college. (And sometimes, the reverse happens, as kids are sacrificed on the various altars of parents who never should have had kids in the first place.)

Literally, the word comes from two old English words that mean “to make holy.” The word *sacrament*, of course, is closely related to *sacrifice* linguistically. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign (something like water or oil or bread or wine) that signifies something holy, like grace, or love, or healing. In the same way, *sacrifice* suggests taking what is ordinary and making it holy.

Most days, without even being conscious of it, we are conformed to this world. We parcel ourselves out, bit by bit, as we render ourselves to “Caesar.” We may not even be aware of what is happening; in fact conformity works best when we are not aware of making any conscious choice. And then we come to this place, and it isn’t just Paul who makes his appeal to us; it is Christ himself. It is God the Holy Trinity, through the words of our liturgy, Who invites (not coerces) us to present ourselves, of our own free volition, to present our souls and bodies, as a living sacrifice to God. And then to allow ourselves to be transformed, rather than conformed. *Transformed into what?*

There are some core truths that Paul holds to and they come up again and again, whether he is speaking to the Christians in Rome, or Corinth, or Galatia, or Thessalonica. The third section of Romans is filled with this kind of material, material that unites Christians from east to west, because some truths take us to the very heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in every time and place. One of Paul’s favorite metaphors is that the Church is like a body; not just any body but *Christ’s own body*. It has many different parts that have different roles. But the goal is for the whole thing to be working together so that eyes see and ears hear and noses smell. He tells the Corinthians that. He tells the Galatians that. And today we hear him telling the Romans that. It’s such a familiar image to us, part of the faith we profess and sing about two thousand years later that we may fail to see the power within it, the power of what it suggests about the Christian faith.

One bread, one body, one Lord of all, one cup of blessing which we bless.

And we, though many, throughout the earth, we are one body in this one Lord.

In Holy Baptism we have been claimed and marked and sealed as Christ’s own. We have been re-branded, called away from imperial power and claimed for Jesus Christ, because there is room for only one lord in our lives. *One Lord, one faith, one baptism*. Paul goes on to say that we all have gifts, given to us by a generous God: gifts that are different and unique to us. We are meant to use those gifts to make the Body stronger, to build it up, so that we might bear witness to the world. None of us can be “the Church” on our own. But together, we have what we need to do the work God has given us to do in Christ’s name.

We can only do this work, however to the extent that we refuse to be conformed to this world, to the extent that we allow ourselves to be transformed and become a living sacrifice to God: for only then can we truly see our way forward. Only then can we discern what is holy and of God, and then begin to live the prayer with which this day’s worship began—live it not just as words on our lips but as that which defines who we are called to become, with God’s help:

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.