

En Route

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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Fifteenth Anniversary of the Pastorate of Gene McAfee  
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“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.” – Romans 12:2

Today is a celebration in our church and it's also an opportunity. Every anniversary gives us a chance to pause, take a breath, step back, have a good look, assess, and decide. We've been together, you and I, for fifteen years today, the first Sunday in October, and the reason I wanted us to celebrate is because – we're still here!

That's right. Let's celebrate the fact that we're still a going concern. When we began ministry together in October of 2003, some folks didn't think we had fifteen years ahead of us, and, truth be told, they had good reason to think that. Faith had been going through some tough times in those days and they weren't completely behind us. We had money problems, and they were serious. We'd had three pastors in less than three years. And then you trusted your pastoral search committee enough to go way out on a limb and call me, and a lot of people thought for sure that would be the end of us.

But as Mark Twain is supposed to have quipped, the rumors of his demise were greatly exaggerated. So also are predictions of ours. We're not dead and we're not even dying. We're coping – and pretty well, I'd say – with the challenges that all mainline suburban congregations have been facing since the late 1970s, when memberships began to decline and the average age of our congregations began to climb. We needn't rehearse all those familiar changes and the reasons for them again this morning; we can talk about them over lunch if we like.

What I want to hold up for you this morning, however, is the reality that we are a smaller, leaner, smarter congregation now than we were fifteen years ago, and that we still have years ahead of us. How many years no one knows and I personally am disinclined to speculate. But what I've observed at Faith United Church of Christ in my fifteen years as pastor here tells me that we're like Rosie the Riveter – we can do it.

And we can do it – whatever it turns out to be – by living into Paul's words to a struggling congregation of Christians in pagan Rome, which I have taken as my text: “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.”

That, friends, is our calling as Christians. It's our calling as a Christian congregation. It's our calling as a church in Richmond Heights. Our task is not to con-form but to be transformed so that we can become those agents of change for the better that our world so desperately needs. If there's one message that has run through all of my preaching, teaching, and counseling during my ministry with

you, it is that message: Do not be conformed. Do not fit in. Do not look, sound, or act like everyone else. Do not go along to get along. Be different. Be the exception. Be the salt and light and leaven that Jesus told us to be. Be transformed.

That's my message for you after fifteen years. I offer it to you – urge it upon you, in fact – because – and here's the important part – we **can** do it. Transformation is possible, for each and every one of us as individuals – and that's where the transformation has to begin – and for us as a congregation of God's people.

Change for the better is possible for all of us, no matter where we are on life's journey. You're never too young to change and you're never too old. You're never too poor to change and you're never too rich. You're never too male to change and you're never too female. You're never too sick to change and you're never too healthy. The only thing – the ONLY thing – that will prevent you from changing is you. You will decide to accept the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit and let it make you new, or you will choose not to and continue with the life you have now. As I've said to you many times before, the offer that God makes to all of us is simply this: You can have this life or you can have something better – the choice is yours.

And that's the second thing I want to say to you this morning to mark our fifteen years together: being a church comes down to a choice. Choosing to heed the voice of our still-speaking God calling us to be a Christian congregation or choosing to spend our time and talent and treasure pursuing other interests is just that, a choice. And for as long as you choose for there to be a church here – choose it and not simply wish for it – there will be.

That's what God was telling the Israelites through Moses in our first lesson from Deuteronomy when he told them to choose life. Christian churches are expressions of the new life in Christ. That's why we exist. We choose to hold up for the world those things that give life to us and to those around us. Moses was telling our spiritual ancestors: Choose those patterns of being in the world that are life-affirming, life-giving, and life-sustaining. Choose those paths that will lead you and help you lead others into life more broadly defined than you have experienced life before – life with more color, more joy, more delight, more sensitivity, more responsiveness and responsibility – than you thought life could have.

Don't try to engineer those changes with your own schemes or some new device that someone wants to sell you. Instead, let God make those changes in you through those ways and decrees and commandments and ordinances that we have so pathetically reduced through shallow moralism.

I was telling my Introduction to Biblical Studies class the other night that one of the sad ironies of many Bible studies is that the people who want to be most faithful turn out to be least faithful when it comes to reading the Bible. Why? Because they reduce everything in it to morality. What is God telling me to do or not to do in this passage? What's the right thing to do here and what's the wrong thing? Was this biblical character behaving in a morally acceptable way or not?

Those are the sorts of questions that every Bible study eventually gets around to. Everything has to have a “moral” in the sense of do this or don't do that.

But the Bible is so much richer and fuller and more theologically sophisticated and profound than simple “Do this” or “Don't do that. Most of the Bible isn't the Ten Commandments; most of the Bible is stories about people trying to be faithful to a divine summons – and often failing miserably – in a world that is big and complex and violent and indifferent and beautiful and lovely and heartbreaking all at the same time. Those statutes and ordinances and commandments and decrees that we so much prefer to ignore were given to us to help us sort through all of that hot mess that we call reality, and by

choosing those we choose God and we choose life. Being genuinely religious doesn't rocket you out of this world onto planet Jesus-And-Me; it plunges you into this world – but equipped to handle it with wisdom and grace and joy. That's what religion does and that's what it's for.

So those are the first two points I want to commend to you this morning as we step back and assess our life together after fifteen years: Do not be conformed, and choose life.

Finally, I urge upon you the words of an angel and the words of Jesus in Matthew's account of Easter: “Do not be afraid.” The angel tells the women who arrive at the empty tomb not to be afraid and Jesus tells his gathered disciples later not to be afraid – and this from the resurrected Christ.

The Bible is such a truthful document because it shows us as we are while showing us the world that God calls us to help create. Jesus' followers were afraid after his crucifixion and they had plenty of reasons for being so. The Romans might come after them next. The religious authorities might double down on their efforts to stop this heretical sect of Judaism. The little movement of followers of the teacher from Nazareth might implode from disagreements and competition. All sorts of things might happen that could kill Christianity in its cradle, and the disciples were very, very afraid.

But what none of them expected was what happened next. Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, appeared among them and told them not to be afraid. The risen Human One knows us for who we are – as well as those many things we fear – and urges us not to be afraid.

We expect the worst and the Bible constantly pulls the rug out from under our expectations because our expectations are so low. You and I live in a world of low expectations – Is anyone surprised by the sorry spectacle that's been unfolding recently in Washington? – and when God interrupts those low expectations with shockingly good news – “He is not here, for he has been raised” – you and I react from our reptile brain and draw back in fear. We are afraid to be confronted with the possibility that our low expectations have not served us well. We are afraid to admit that we have allowed ourselves to be cheated out of life as it might be because we were in the passenger's seat of life rather than in the driver's seat. We are afraid to venture and to risk because the maps the world has drawn for us tell us that out there be monsters.

But no, the gospel tells us, out there be God. God is ahead of us, waiting for us to catch up. God is waiting for us to overcome our fear sufficiently to put down our verbal as well as our mechanical weapons. God is waiting for us to be the church in a way that we may not have been before. God is waiting for us to be proactive and not just reactive.

You and I have been a church together for fifteen years, and I see no reason why we shouldn't expect to be together for another fifteen. I'll be as old as dirt by then and some of you will be older than that. Fifteen may be a little optimistic, but certainly we've proved the naysayers wrong for our first decade and a half together, and we've defied the odds. We did it, I believe, by paying attention to the world around us and by listening to God's still-speaking voice. And that's what we need to continue doing. We can do that by following three simple instructions, all drawn from God's written word this morning: Do not be conformed, choose life, and do not be afraid.

That's my message for you this morning, on our fifteenth anniversary together. That combination – do not be conformed, choose life, and do not be afraid – has got us through fifteen years together. It'll get us through more.