

Sermon  
12 Pentecost—Proper 16-A-2  
St. Andrew's, Methuen  
August 23, 2020  
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Isaiah 51:1-6  
Psalm 138  
Romans 12:1-8  
Matthew 16:13-20

St Paul writes: "Do not be conformed to this world,(with its White supremacy, racism, sexism, violence and greed) but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...."

**What is this "renewing of the mind" Paul is calling us to?**

A neurological study awhile back determined the average person has around 60,000 thoughts a day. If you remove 8 hours for sleep, that works out to about 1 thought per second. These thoughts mostly just show up out of thin air and jump from topic to topic, as Zen Buddhist monks say, like drunk monkeys in a tree.

If we had a roommate who spoke out loud his every thought, we'd kick him out. If we had a speaker on our head that broadcast every thought, we'd wither be put in jail or drugged into unconsciousness.

The voice in the head drives us to find entertainment and other activities that for a moment still the mind and give us some relief. Businesses and schools give mindfulness training to help us access inner silence, so we can give attention to what is actually going on in front of us.

**But there's more: Those researchers found that** about three quarters of our 60,000 thoughts are negative—that most of **our mental noise has a negative valence:** the coffee's too cold, the day's too hot, my foot hurts, I'm not smart enough, my spouse is messy, am I getting Covid, will I keep my job, will Black lives ever matter. 45,000 negative thoughts a day **will depress even the most optimistic person.**

We all know how powerful negative thinking darkens our lives. After seventh grade I moved from the public Tuxedo Elementary School to private Westminster High in Atlanta, where my oldest brother had been valedictorian and my next older brother was currently excelling. I remember coming home after my first day in Latin class and walking around the outside of my house in great distress, because I knew without a doubt that I would

never understand Latin and that I would soon fail out of school. I was so overwhelmed with negative thoughts I broke down crying.

**This is surely part of why Saint Paul is calling us to the renewal of our minds** and why Paul says us at the end of Philippians to focus on the positive. He says, **“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things.”**

Paul knows, however, that our problem with negative thinking emerges out of **how we view our lives in the world**. If I imagine I’m a fragile, skin-encased person who at any moment may suffer a meaningless death and fall into nothingness, then negativity is perfectly rational.

Therefore, Paul’s main task in all his letters is **to change not just what we think about, but change the view of the world that produces our thinking. If our worldview doesn’t change, then our thinking won’t change.**

For as Richard Rohr says, “We don’t see things **as they are**, we see things **as we are.**” **If we want to escape the mental prison of negativity, we must dethrone the scared ego, and enthrone Jesus as both Lord and Christ who will make us aware that we belong to the eternal family of God, beyond the reach of sin and death.**

So, Jesus’ question, “Who do **you** say that I am?”, is not merely academic. Jesus has no interest in Simon calling him Christ, **if Simon doesn’t also experience the transformation of Christ.**

**Jesus wants Simon to experience what the Prodigal Son experiences, who when languishing in the far country one day “comes to himself and says, ‘I will get up and go to my father...’”**

When we know Jesus as the Christ, the anointed of God, who is One with the Father-Mother God, we have a foundation upon which to stand to receive **the grace and courage to be transformed by Christ.**

**There’s a paradox here: on one hand, Christ is our security, the One who protects us from the distress of the world, and on the other hand, Christ is the One who calls us to follow him into the distress as agents of transforming love.**

**All individuals and parishes struggle with how to work out this paradox:**

I remember sitting with the vestry in front of a roaring fire on our annual vestry retreat back in North Carolina as we faced two questions:

**The first question was: "Do we want to grow as a parish?"**

Do we want to have more new families in the pews and their kids in church school? Do we want retirees from Ohio and New Jersey living in those big developments along the Pamlico River joining the church? Do we want to develop new ministries to serve both those who want to grow in faith and those who want to heal the social fabric of our town and world?

As we talked every face began to brighten, as they thought about the parish extending the welcome of Christ and his transformation. We could feel the energy rise in the room. Yes, **absolutely, we want to grow in following Christ to engage the world.**

But then we asked a second question: **Do we want our parish to change?**

No, we said, we love our church just the way it is. It is comfortable and friendly, we know everyone's name, we know what car they drive and which pew they sit in. We don't want strangers taking our pews and their kids making noise during worship. **We certainly don't want people telling us how their church did things back in Cleveland.**

**The problem was clear: we could be transformed or we could be comfortable, but at that moment it was hard to see how to be both.**

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 When Simon tells Jesus that he is the Christ, Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church". A church built on a rock suggests permanence, immovability. But then Jesus goes on to say: "and the gates of Hades—death—will not prevail against it", which suggests a church on the move.

**The church is to be secure on the immovable rock AND she is to risk everything in moving out against the powers that oppress and kill.**

**It's never "either-or", but always "both-and".**

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 The solution to how this works out in real life, as Jesus says, only comes through revelation, which means **the renewing of our minds is not so we can figure out what we want,** but so we can figure out what **God wants.**

As Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, **so that—so that—you may discern what is the will of God.**"

**For it is only as we seek first the will of God that our busy minds can find their rest in Jesus the Christ.**