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Pentecost 15

For the first two hundred or more years of the early church, membership in the body was definitely counter-culture. Christianity was not an old established religion in the ancient world, and majority opinion was that those who belonged to this strange new group were far outside normal life. To be a Christian was to be a misfit.

That changed in the fourth century when The Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Membership was not only approved, but was a good idea if one wished to advance in society or politics. The question is whether or not this acceptance and domestication was good for the church. It certainly led to the popular misconception that being a Christian is normal. I assure you, it is not.

It used to be normative, in the sense of society's assumption that all right-thinking people belonged to a church. If you did not have a religious affiliation, you were seen to be suspect, possibly even dangerous. The role of the church was to form well-behaved, productive citizens. And churches, for the most part, performed as expected, not often rocking the boat. Christianity was, to use the language of the Apostle Paul, 'conformed to this world'.

Martin Luther King Jr. once preached about this situation of religion in America, and the enormous pressures that, as he put it, "...condition our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo." He looked at the churches of his day and said that "...they are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society." Has anything changed since that sermon was preached?

Probably the biggest shift is that the church is no longer so central an institution of our society. The Reverend William Willimon, United Methodist Bishop of Alabama, says that he can date the beginning of that change to 1963. That was the year that the Fox Movie Theater, in his hometown of Greenville, North Carolina, defied the state's antiquated Blue Laws and began to show movies on Sunday evenings. He says, "On that night, the last pocket of resistance to secularism in the Western world gave in." The cultural captivity of

Christianity was at an end. If people were going to become Christians, they were going to have to intentionally choose to do so.

I think most of us recognize that Christianity is no longer normative. But most of us still imagine that it is normal. As I said before, it is not. Paul says that we are not supposed to be normal, or as he put it “conformed to this world,” but to be “transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.” He says that we are to strive for transformed nonconformity in order to discover “what is good and acceptable and perfect.” That word ‘perfect’ might be better translated as ‘mature’. In other words, we are called both as individuals and as the body of Christ to grow up into the Christian maturity of cultural maladjustment.

That might seem like an odd thing to be seeking, and perhaps not what the parents here had in mind in bringing their kids to church. But as King put it, “There are some things in our world to which people of goodwill must be maladjusted.” Perhaps we ought not be happily adjusted to such normal things as a state of constant war, an economy that insists on eating us alive, the eroding of any safety net for the least of these our sisters and brothers, the ecological devastation of the world. Perhaps in these and other matters we should, as the church, move from being a thermometer to a thermostat.

We might fear that this would generate enormous controversy. But I will never forget a sermon I heard at Yale Divinity School, given by the world renowned scholar of Church History, Roland Bainton. He had read a statistic which suggested that by the year 2050, there would no longer be a church. He said he wasn’t sure whether such a prediction would actually come to pass. “But,” he added, “if the church has died out by then, it will not be because it offended too many people, but rather because it had no more flavor than the white of an egg.”

Christians are not meant to be bland and flavorless representatives of the status quo. We are to be the saving salt of the earth – maybe not present in great quantity in a recipe, but essential if it is to have any taste at all. This doesn’t mean that we are to be a continual Op Ed page, issuing serial condemnations of the way things are. Instead we are to live real lives, which really are an alternative way of being - deeply human lives that embody rather than preach.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson, Jesus asks the disciples who the people say he is. They have a number of interesting answers – Elijah finally returned,

John the Baptist raised from the dead. The harder question is the one that comes next: "But who do you say that I am?" You can just see them all scuffing their feet in the dust, trying to figure out the right reply, hoping the teacher won't call on them. But Peter is ready. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This answer was the one which would form the foundation of the church. It would be the fundamental testimony to be carried before the power structures of the world, making martyrs of many.

Jesus still asks this question of each of us. "But who do you say that I am?" It is not a question that can be answered from within society's view of what is normal. The world around us names Jesus as a teacher of wisdom, a healer, a gifted teller of stories. These are all understandable answers. But none of these descriptions match up with our fundamental faith. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

That answer can only be given from lives and hearts that are not conformed to the world. This testimony, passed down to us from the first disciples, is the testimony of transformation. The shaping of people who can answer the world with their lips and their lives is the task of the gathered community, the Body of Christ. We cannot grow into the maturity of a deep answer to Jesus' question without our presence to each other.

Paul points out that this does not mean that we all become just like each other, little identical good people. Such cookie-cutter uniformity of interchangeable widgets is actually the model of the world around us, in its efficient business-as-usual manner. Rather what we each grow into in the Body of Christ is our truest individual nature as gifted people – some as prophets, some as ministers, some teachers, some givers.

Here we are to become people who can love each other's difference, welcome each other's gifts, and so create the alternative community of Holy non-conformity. It is in this way that the church is able to become a thermostat rather than a thermometer. When we seek to live our way toward the deep transformation which we are offered in Jesus Christ, we become authentic servants to God, to each other and to the world in which we live.