

“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...” Each Sunday during Lent, we have been exploring different ways of listening for God. This week we are invited to listen beyond the voices. Having this in mind when I read the scripture for today, this verse about not conforming to the world grabbed me and wouldn't let me go.

Earlier this week I came across a story and a video about an unusual occurrence on the game show “Wheel of Fortune.” The episode was part of Veteran's Week in November 2015 and the three contestants were former or current members of the military. By the last round, one of the contestants, Nura Fountano, held a commanding lead. When it came time for Nura to pick her first letter, she called out “Z”. Host Pat Sayjack seemed dumbfounded and responded, “Say that again for me, did you say Z?” She responded “as in Zulu, Z.” Not surprisingly there were no Zs in the phrase. For her next turn she chose X. And again, no Xs in the puzzle. The next two turns she took too long to answer and lost her turn. People on Twitter initially responded with exasperation. Why was she choosing these unusual letters? It seemed like she was actually trying to lose. It appears that in fact that was exactly what she was doing. At the end of the round, the contestant who was in last place with \$1600 had brought his total winnings up to \$6400. Knowing that she had a wide enough lead to still win the game, Nura lost the round on purpose in order to share the wealth with a fellow veteran.<sup>1</sup>

This story is so impactful because it is rare and it is the opposite of the messages we receive about how we are expected to behave. We are inundated by the voices of our world telling us things that are often contrary to the ways and will of God. Messages that tells us that success means lots of money and possessions even if others have to go without. CEOs make as much as 300 times more than the median employee.<sup>2</sup> We want to own the latest gadgets but don't consider the living or working conditions of the people working in the factories. We hear and see messages that tell us we are not good looking enough and therefore need to buy products that make us look better, that we

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.inspiremore.com/wheel-of-fortune-veterans-week>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2018/02/21/as-companies-reveal-gigantic-ceo-to-worker-pay-ratios-some-worry-how-low-paid-workers-might-take-the-news/?utm\\_term=.a35abbe4d3b0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2018/02/21/as-companies-reveal-gigantic-ceo-to-worker-pay-ratios-some-worry-how-low-paid-workers-might-take-the-news/?utm_term=.a35abbe4d3b0)

have to be thin or in great shape in order to be lovable, that we deserve to have everything the way we want it, that more is better, that if we are struggling financially it must be because we aren't trying hard enough, that needing and asking for help is a sign of weakness and failure, paradoxically that every single one of us is special and unique and yet not good enough just the way we are, that we should care about our own country first and foremost, regardless of the pain and suffering the resulting actions might cause other people. Lastly, there is immense pressure to fit in. To buy the right brands, to look and dress a certain way, to go with the flow and not ruffle feathers. We get messages daily about what it means to be a man – strong, stoic, a provider, someone who takes charge, kills all the spiders, and isn't afraid to get their hands dirty. And women? Polite, quiet, be the caretaker, dress in ways that don't invite the wrong kind of attention, and that shopping is our favorite hobby. Whether we choose to conform to some, or all of these societal expectations, the pressures to conform to this world are immense.

This is nothing new of course. The specifics of the pressures may have changed over time, but conforming has meant survival for thousands of years. But in the first century, nearly 2,000 years ago, Paul called on the Christians in Rome to reject conforming to the pressures of the world and instead be transformed and discern the will of God.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King delivered a sermon based on Romans 12 verses 1-2. Dr. King writes, “Do not conform” is difficult advice in a generation when crowd pressures have unconsciously conditioned our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo. Many voices and forces urge us to choose the path of least resistance and bid us never to fight for an unpopular cause and never to be found in a pathetic minority of two or three... Success, recognition, and conformity are the bywords of the modern world where everyone seems to crave the anesthetizing security of being identified with the majority.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 11.

This sermon was delivered in 1954 in the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott. The civil rights movement was just getting underway and passage of the Civil Rights Act was 10 years away. Those participating in and supporting the boycott faced enormous pressure to stop. Many white citizens retaliated against the African American community: King's home was bombed, and many boycotters were threatened or fired from their jobs. Several times the police arrested protesters and took them to jail, once charging 80 leaders of the boycott with violating a 1921 law that barred conspiracies to interfere with lawful business without just cause.<sup>4</sup> In the face of violence, harassment, personal loss, and great sacrifice, the boycott lasted for 381 days and finally resulted in a Supreme Court decision that ruled the segregation on buses was unconstitutional.

It is not easy to seek transformation instead of conformation. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul reminds them (and us) that we need one other in this effort. To not think so highly of ourselves that we start to believe we don't need anyone else's gifts. We are members of each other, and each person is valued and valuable. Paul goes on to remind us what it looks like to be co-creators of God's realm on earth – To love genuinely. To hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good. To love other people. To be enthusiastic and on fire in the ways we serve God. To be joyful in our hope, to be patient in times of suffering, and to pray unceasingly.

Although it is not specifically a faith-based movement, I see these elements of these qualities in the rising up of young people who are calling for gun reform. For those students who attend schools with widespread support of Wednesday's Walkout, it was not difficult to participate. But there were quite a few students who attend schools that threatened disciplinary action if students chose to walkout of class for the 17-minute nationwide protest. Wylie Greer, a high school student in Arkansas, joined only two other classmates in participating in the walkout. While they were sitting outside, the principal of the school asked if they knew there would be consequences for their actions. They said yes and then returned to class. The consequences turned out to be a choice of a two day in-school suspension, or two swats with a paddle. Greer said he

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Montgomery-bus-boycott>

was surprised by the choices but with the support of his parents, he picked the paddle. Greer said it "was the noble and right thing to do." "In my mind," he stated, "the in-school suspension was essentially conceding to sitting down and shutting up, which is what the admin and school wanted to happen, to keep it quiet almost. I felt if I stood up and took the punishment in an honorable way, that it was better than doing what they wanted me to do which is shut up and go on with our lives."<sup>5</sup> Talk about disrupting the drumbeat of the status quo!

Some of us have an easier time than others in tuning out the voices of the world that are at odds with God's desires for us. Being part of the church is an important piece of the puzzle. We come together in a communal reminder to re-orient ourselves and hold each other lovingly accountable to being followers of Jesus.

The question is church, are we willing to ruffle a few feathers? Are we willing to hold fast to that which is good and denounce what is evil even if it means disagreeing and even offending people we care about or stepping outside our comfort zones? Are we willing to let go of the expectations of others that society has ingrained in us – expectations that result in us judging other people for how they dress, how much money they have, or if they fit societal norms for beauty and gender roles?

May we fight for the dignity and loving treatment of every human being regardless of where they were born, if they use a wheelchair, the color of their skin, or if they are old enough to vote. May we seek to be bearers of God's love and pursuers of God's justice, in every moment, in every fiber of our being. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/17/us/paddling-for-student-protester/index.html>