

Reflection for August 23, 2020

The Church's—Only!—Foundation

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.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.

We sing of a church seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ's presence in the world.

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

Creator God, you have entrusted to us knowledge of good and evil. You have permitted us knowledge of the world in which we live, and that knowledge has yielded immense gains for us, gains of control, of productivity, of explanation, of connections of causes and effects. Only rarely—like now!—do we collide with your hiddenness that summons us and embarrasses us. We peek into your awesome hidden presence; we find our certitudes quite disrupted. Thus we pause at the edge of your holiness, finding that your unfathomable presence is an odd mix of mercy and judgment, of generosity and accountability, of forgiveness and starchy realism. We dwell at the edge of your mystery for an instant...not longer. Then we return to our proper work of knowledge, research, explanation, and management. By that instant, however, we are changed...sobered, summoned, emancipated, filled with wonder before your holiness. It is for that holiness that outflanks us that we give you thanks. Amen.

We have been exploring Paul's Letter to the Christians in Rome. In today's passage, he exhorts those who have experienced and now claim the gift of grace in Christ, to respond with their full selves. Because of Christ, nothing stands between humanity and God. He also urges them not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by renewal of thinking and spiritual discernment.

We live in exciting and exhilarating and perilous times. We are living with a global pandemic, working frantically to care for its victims, both biologically and economically. I do not believe God creates crises such as pandemics, but neither do I believe God wastes such opportunities. Rather, God invites us to use these moments to move closer to God's intention and hopes for human life that we see in the words of Paul: "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."

The five big tech-oriented giants—Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook and Google's parent company—are now worth a combined US \$7.6 trillion. With the COVID crisis, 40 million Americans lost their jobs. "Globalization is nothing more than capital on the prowl in search of ever cheaper sources of labor" (Wade Davis). Walter Brueggemann explains discernment this way: "It is possible to trust that the God of the Gospel is in, with, and under the crisis of the virus without imagining that God is the cause of it. As God often does, in hidden ways God may be amid the crisis to do the hard work of checking arrogance and curbing hubris. Amid the virus, we now face an alert about the indifferent, exploitative world of global self-sufficiency we have been making and that some of mightily enjoy. We now see curbed the absolute world of technological certitude that faces a mystery beyond calculation. We see that our immense power is unable to fend off a threat that is for the moment beyond our explanation. We see that our

great wealth is not able to assure us of security. We are pressed back to basics” (*Virus as a Summons to Faith*, p. 57)! Is this *a bitter loss of faith*? Or is it *opening for new faith*?

“[Do not] think of yourself more highly than you ought to think” (Romans 12:3). Humility in this passage is not about lowliness, meekness, or submissiveness as much as it is a call to recognize that all followers of Jesus have a part (a gift, a function) in the body of Christ that is no more and no less important and valued than anyone else’s part. Each person brings particular gifts that become a part of the whole. When all parts function together, the body works the way it should. We have all received the gift of God’s grace, not as a result of our own efforts, but because of God’s goodness and abiding love. In order to live well in community, as the body of Christ, all must recognize their own gifts as well as the gifts of others. Mindy Douglas reminds us that “living in community is perhaps the greatest challenge to Christian life” (*Connections*, p. 256).

Our churches and communities of faith are made up of people with different gifts, behaviours, actions, and opinions. Paul instructs us not to conform to the ways of the world, where people define others by a hierarchical system of worth; rather, to be transformed so that we might “discern the will of God—what is good, acceptable, and perfect” (Romans 12:2). The mind of God builds up the body of Christ and seeks strength in the body through the contributions of all those who have been gifted differently, but who dwell in peace and grace as a full and worthy part of the whole. This is the church’s foundation.

“You are *Petros*,” Jesus says to Peter, “and on this *petra* I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). As Barbara Brown Taylor explains: “It is the same word Jesus uses twice, the masculine and then the feminine form for “rock,” but there is subtle difference between the two. *Petros*—the

name Jesus gives Peter—means a stone or a pebble, a small piece of a larger rock, while *petra* means a boulder, a mother lode, a great big rock. That makes Peter a chip off the old block, a piece of the rock, against which the powers of death shall not prevail. He is a rock because he is a chunk off the Rock of Ages, and it is on this *relationship* that the church is built, not on any virtue of Peter's—or yours, or mine. If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then there is hope for all of us, because he is one of us, because he remains God's chosen rock whether he is acting like a cornerstone or a stumbling block, and because he shows us that blessedness is less about perfectness than about willingness—that what counts is to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time that we fall, knowing that we are Peter's kin, and whether we rise or whether we fall, whether we give the right answer or the wrong one, we too are chips off the old block, pieces of the one true rock against which even the powers of death shall not prevail" (God's Rock, p. 73).

To not be conformed to this world is to engage in *relentless, uncompromising hope*. This is more than a civic assurance that "we will get through this." It is rather the conviction that God will not quit until God has arrived at God's good intention. There is a purpose at work in, with, under, and beyond our best resolves. That holy purpose is tenacious, steadfast, and relentless, that we and all of God's creation will come to wellbeing. The task of the church is to hope in a way that is grounded in the good faithful resolve of God.

This resolve puts me in mind of the great German anthem of thanks, "Now Thank We All Our God." The best loved hymn of German Evangelicals was written by Pastor Martin Rinckart during the Thirty years War (1618-1648) as a table grace for his family. Martin Rinckart was pastor in Eilenburg, Saxony, the town of his birth. The walled city was a refuge for many fleeing war and pestilence. Left as the only

clergyman in town, he often buried as many as forty or fifty persons in one day. Although his wife died of the pestilence, Rinckart survived. He wrote not only during the long-running war but in the face of pestilence that decimated the population as he presided over their many deaths. We do well to ponder this simple table prayer of gratitude amid pestilence:

*Now thank we all our God
with hearts and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done,
in whom this world rejoices;
who, from our mothers' arms,
hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.
O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in God's grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills in this world
and the next.*

The context of his work, not unlike our own, was a scene of relentless death. Yet Rinckart wrote and sang of thanks! The hymn celebrates the

“wondrous things” done by “this bounteous God.” We can picture Pastor Rinckart with his children counting out, one by one, “countless gifts of love.” The hymn invites us to cling to God’s grace that “frees us of all ills” in all imaginable futures. The words are as sure, bold, and awe-filled as Jesus’ blessing of Peter, as Paul’s doxology for the Christians in Rome. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray:

O God, maker of heaven and earth, you are our help in the midst of need and danger. Bless our gifts this day, that they may find their way to those who feel hopeless and without resource. May our gifts be a sign of your hope and love, and may the people we help find their way to safety. Amen.

Rev. Bill Cantelon