

"A FUTURE WITH HOPE"

Isaiah 40:28-31; Jeremiah 29:11-14; Romans 12:1-2

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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When I graduated from Dallastown High School in 1977, I thought I knew it all. When I graduated from Penn State University in 1983 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Community Development, I realized that I didn't know as much as I thought I did. And when I graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1990 with a Masters of Divinity degree, I knew that I didn't know much of anything!

This sermon is especially for our graduates- but the rest of you may listen in too- for aren't we all looking for a future with hope?

Our graduates have experienced something quite unique- they were juniors and seniors during a pandemic. Many of the things they thought would happen during their senior year didn't. Or if it did, it happened in a much different way than they had expected.

Graduates, you had to let go of some of your dreams and plans. You had to adjust to new ways of learning and socializing. You experienced a great deal of loss, loneliness, and anxiety.

It hasn't been easy. But you did it! And we are proud of you. So, now what? That is always the question, isn't it? You have barely graduated, and we are already asking you-- so, what's next? The first thing I recommend is taking a break and catching your breath. Take some time to bask in your accomplishments. Think back over the past year or two and realize just how much you have achieved. And don't forget to thank the people that helped you to get there- your parents, your family, your friends, your teachers, and possibly even your church.

Maybe you are thrilled to be done- glad to see the end of high school or college. Maybe you feel a bit sad, sorry to say goodbye to your time in school. Maybe you know just where you are heading. Or maybe you have no idea at all.

Wherever you are right now, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, I have a few words of advice for you. **Be the best YOU possible. There is no one else in the whole world who is just like you. Be your own glorious, fabulous self! God has created you for a reason- and you will spend the rest of your life figuring out what that reason is and living into it.**

The Apostle Paul wrote similar words to the Christians living in the heart of the evil empire, the city of Rome. These Christians were a tiny minority trying to follow the ways of Jesus in a place where those ways were not welcome or accepted. Imitating Jesus could get you in a lot of trouble in a place like Rome. It would have been much easier for the Christians to keep their faith a secret and in public, to conform, to just act like everyone else. But Paul calls them to a greater commitment to Christ, to a stronger relationship with God. This is what he wrote to them. - - - - -

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.

Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you.

The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what God does for us, not by what we are and what we do for God.

In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we?

So, since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

(Romans 12:1-5, from The Message)

Sometimes Paul really makes sense. Living as a Christian, as one who follows Jesus, is about more than what you believe- it is about your actions and your attitudes in the world. What we do with our lives in this world matters. Being a Christian doesn't end with your name on a church list. Being a Christian is first and foremost about a relationship with the Risen Christ.

And in that relationship, we continue to learn and grow and attempt to conform our lives to the kind of life Jesus lived. He lived a life devoted to God and to God's people.

He lived a life of compassion, kindness, love, and grace. He spent his time with the outcasts and the misfits. He healed the sick and loved those considered sinners by the religious people. He went where he wasn't supposed to go and did what he wasn't supposed to do. He fed people. He welcomed people. He challenged people. He loved people. And he turned the expectations of the world upside down. He was a nonconformist- unwilling to model his life on what the world expected. Instead, he modeled his life on what God expected.

Jesus preached a gospel of love and called people to a relationship based, not on rules and regulations, but on love and grace.

We live in a world that is very happy to tell us who we are supposed to be, what we are supposed to do, how we are supposed to think, who we are supposed to like. Corporations and politicians spend millions of dollars trying to convince us who we are supposed to be. They label us as consumers and make us think we want to live within their narrowly defined categories.

They will constantly try to get us to pay attention (and pay our money) to things that do not matter so we will ignore the things that do.

Paul encourages the Christians in Rome not to become so well-adjusted to the culture around them that they fit right in without even thinking about it. He calls them to allow God to renew their minds, to transform them and bring them to maturity. Maturity is about knowing who we are, what our abilities are, and how to use them for good. Maturity is something we seek and develop for our whole lives.

In a sermon way back in 1954 the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. called Christians to be "transformed nonconformists." He called the good folks at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to resist the pressure for cultural conformity. He acknowledged that the call " *to condition our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo*" is quite oppressive. He said that we have a higher loyalty; that we need to find ways to be, not the thermometer that registers the temperature of our culture, but the thermostat that transforms and regulates the temperature of society.

Dr. King issued a great challenge to us, even today, when he said, *"There are some things in our world to which (people) of goodwill must be maladjusted. I confess that I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination, to the moral degeneracy of religious bigotry and the corroding effects of narrow sectarianism, to economic conditions that deprive (people) of work and food, and to the insanities of militarism and the self-defeating effects of violence."* (1)

Dr. King lived his life based on his belief that hope for our world rests in creatively and positively maladjusted believers.

My wish for you, our graduates, and for all of us, is to seek the transformation of Christ so that with the renewal of our hearts and minds we can be transformed nonconformists. Our world needs people who are willing to step out from the crowd and model a new way to live; the way of Christ. This way isn't always easy- but that is why we do it together- as the body of Christ- the family of faith. That is why we worship together every Sunday- to remind ourselves and each other of who and what we are called to be. In this body we can see how others live every day as transformed nonconformists. We can search for our purpose and our place. We can discern what our unique gifts are and how they can be used for the glory of God and the good of others. As a member of this family of faith we can see how imperfect people fall and fail and still get up and go on- every single day.

Centuries ago, God's people were defeated in battle and carted off to live in exile in their enemy's homeland. They were utterly bereft and could see no future, no hope. They wondered where God was and why God had not helped them. For the past year and a half, we have lived in a kind of exile ourselves as the Covid pandemic roared around us. We were separated from the ones we love, forced to stay home from work and school. We wore our masks, stockpiled toilet paper, put bottles of hand sanitizer everywhere, worshiped on zoom, and had our groceries delivered. We cheered for overworked and under resourced medical personnel.

A few of our people contracted the virus, but fortunately, recovered with few lasting effects. We watched as the number of deaths climbed upward each day. And now, over 600,000 people, just in this country, have died of the virus. Some of you have lost loved ones. All of us were affected by this pandemic that has swept around the world.

In the time of the biblical exile, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke to the people and gave them a message that sounded impossible. They offered hope, an end to exile, and renewed strength even as God's people languished in enemy territory. And what did the prophets promise these dispirited people? They promised them transformation. They

promised that God's creating power could and would transform their lives of desperation and give them a future with hope.

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? God is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth! This God does not faint or grow weary! And you won't either. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, a future with hope."

Maybe you are wondering what role you could possibly have in creating this transformed world, this future with hope? You are, after all, just one person.

Dorothy Day gave us some encouragement. She was a journalist, social activist, and radical Christian. She worked to create a better world for the poor. She was born in 1897 and died in 1980. She once said, *"People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that. No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do."*

Parker Palmer wrote, *"Hope is holding a creative tension between what is and what could and should be, each day doing something to narrow the distance between the two."*

That is our task- to find something that we can do each day that will narrow the distance between what is and what could be.

Take with you these words from Victoria Safford.

"Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope-

Not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower;

Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;

Nor the strident gates of self-righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges;

Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of 'Everything is gonna be alright,'

But a very different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition,

The place of resistance and defiance,

The piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be,

*As it might be, as it **will** be;*

The place from which you glimpse not only the struggle,

But joy in the struggle-

As we stand there, beckoning and calling,

Telling people what we are seeing; asking people what they see."

Hannah, Sam, Geo, and Wil, my prayer for you is this: that you will place your life before God as an offering. I hope you will plant yourselves at the gates of hope. And tell us what you see. May God bless you now and always. Amen.

End Notes:

- *"Transformed Nonconformist," Martin Luther King, Jr., preached November 1954 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.*