

“Resistance is Not Futile”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Paul encouraged the Christians in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” To a people in great distress, that was a major challenge. They were relatively recent converts to faith in Jesus Christ, and keeping the faith was tough for them. Already, Caesar had blamed them for a catastrophic fire that consumed a large part of Rome. They were scapegoated because they were different, because they were a small and vulnerable minority, and their punishment was exile. Only recently, under the order of a new Caesar, these people had been allowed to return home, but they were still treated as outcasts.

It must have been tempting to indulge in practices that would have helped them fit in a little better; practices they knew would betray their faith. It’s hard to have courage, to discern what God wants, and to make the right decisions, when those choices cut against the grain of society. It’s hard to be visibly different in a world that demands conformity. We know how tempting it is to conform ourselves to this world, instead of being transformed by the renewing of our minds. How much harder then is it to make of ourselves a living sacrifice to God?

Yet Paul encouraged them to resist temptation, to say no to Caesar and yes to God by following the faith with integrity, regardless of cost, confident that whatever might happen, God would take care of them, and we, like them, are called by God to say no when we are tempted or compelled to do what we know is wrong, even if our resistance comes at a cost. Despite the risk and the possible loss, it’s worthwhile. When we say no to the forces that oppose God’s love, forces of cruelty and idolatry, we say yes to God.

It can start with something as simple as seeing what others do not perceive and serving as a witness to the truth of God's love, sharing what we think as others remain silent or say or do things that contradict God's command to love. This is how it happened with Peter. Jesus asked the disciples what people were saying about him, and answers flowed forth. But when Jesus wanted to know what they thought, only Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Maybe the other disciples didn't know that, or maybe they had their suspicions but were too afraid of getting it wrong. Peter's response was an act of courage, enabled by faith, and his words revealed the truth for others.

Now we might be tempted to think, "Well, that's Peter. I'm way out of his league," and we'd be right, but Paul lists a host of remarkable gifts in his Letter to the Romans -- prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, diligent leadership, compassion. This is an indicative, not exhaustive, list. There are more spiritual gifts than could be named. Nobody has them all, but everyone who follows Jesus has access to one or more of these gifts. If we are ready to receive and exercise them, which can be awesome and joyous and sometimes difficult and unpleasant, then through us God's inexhaustible love will find expression in a world that desperately needs it.

Many people exercise these gifts without even being aware of it. We help work to fulfill God's purposes out in a sort of personal anonymity, oblivious to how God works through us, even though there are others who can see how we bless people with spiritual gifts through ministry. Keep on doing what you're doing. Someday, the veil will be lifted, and you will see how God works through you. We just aren't always aware in the moment of how God's gifts of grace are operative in our lives, but the presence and impact of those gifts are undeniable.

However, the most common reason why we cannot see how God's spiritual gifts flow through us is that we think our efforts paltry. We disregard spiritual gifts because they don't move mountains or bring world peace in an instant. All I do is this or that. Often we preface our ministry with "all I do," because very little of it is really spectacular, and we live in a world that celebrates the grand gesture to exclusion of almost everything else. Take basketball. The game-winning shot gets all the attention, but what about the person who made the pass or set the pick or cleared the lane or made the crucial defensive stop on the other end? Without each decision, each effort, there would be no game-winning shot.

Our world seems unaware of the many decisive moments that happen every day, when we make decisions based on our faith in God's love and mercy. "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Offer yourself up to God as a living sacrifice for the common good. When we commit to that sacred task together, we can help release God's grace into the world. God is eager, yearning to work through us, to fulfill His vision for how the world is meant to be.

It may take more time than we like. Centuries went by before the Christians of Rome could follow their faith legally without fear of reprisal. Scripture counsels patience, but the time for ministry, for resistance, for accepting and sharing gifts, is now and always. It's time to follow the example of our Christian ancestors in Rome. It's time to resist and say no to certain people and things so that we can say a faithful yes to God. It means being different in a world that makes fun of those who dare to be different, and frequently does much worse than just making fun. It means being kind instead of cruel, forgiving rather than hateful, speaking the truth to powers that tell lies, showing mercy when so many act heartlessly.

Seek faith and cultivate it carefully in the fellowship of the Church. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Pray for the grace of spiritual power from God, and accept with gratitude the gift God has chosen for you to share. Allow that gift to flow through you, and stand in awe of how Christ takes you and makes you into his witness, an agent of good news in a world that sorely needs it. Amen.