

“Be Transformed”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
August 24, 2014 Ordinary 21A

Exodus 1:8-21 Romans 12:1-8

Last Wednesday night we arrived back safely from our week long trip to Guatemala. Twenty-nine of us got to help build a middle school out of recycled bottles with an organization called “Hug It Forward.” The bottles are stuffed tightly with inorganic trash to create what they call “eco bricks.” The bottles are then tied to chicken wire and covered with cement to form insulation for the walls. It was hard work in the hot sun, but lots of fun working together. And that was only a small part of the trip. The best part was being welcomed into a remote village in the Guatemalan mountains untouched by tourism, and being able to interact with the children and adults there as they worked and played with us. And it was also wonderful to get to know our own church members and the other people who joined our group. We have many new friends now.

We were in an area of Guatemala where the scenes of everyday life among the mountains and volcanoes are brightened by the colorful clothing of the Mayan culture. It’s a beautiful country with many good and hard-working people. But many people there survive as subsistence farmers, which means they are barely able to grow enough food to feed their family each day, with nothing left over. And the current generation of adults in the countryside has very little education, because for over 30 years their families were caught in a long civil war. Many were killed during this war, and the rest hid in the mountains to survive. Now that the fighting has stopped, they are determined to provide something better for their children.

We visited what they called a “humble home.” It consisted of an open-air kitchen with a fire for cooking and a faucet for running water, plus a small room with a light bulb on the ceiling, and a bedroom which slept two adults and nine children in two small beds. The walls were made of corn stalks, which had to be replaced every few years. The tin roof was rusty and had tiny holes in it. In the bedroom a plastic sheet hung over the bed, to catch any rat urine that might drip through the roof as they slept at night.

We were told that half the men in that village had worked in the United States long enough to send back money to build a better home. And I did notice many houses with sturdy roofs, concrete floors, and some even with tile patios in the front. They say that the best form of foreign aid is immigrants who work in this country and send money back home. Whether they are here legally or not, the money is well-earned, and is not wasted on corrupt politicians. It goes directly to people who put it to good use.

We spent one day of our trip touring some Mayan ruins. The Mayans had a sophisticated civilization dating back thousands of years before Christ. But it was almost entirely wiped out in the 1500s by Spanish conquistadors, who took over the area, killing most of the Mayan people and enslaving the rest. Our guide told us that the conquerors banned the Mayan language and imposed their own culture on the people. But the

Spanish did not educate the Mayan women or pay much attention to them, so the women were able to keep the language and some of the Mayan customs alive at home, secretly passing them on to their children and their children's children. Today there is an interest in reviving Mayan culture and scholars are piecing together information from found documents and the folk traditions that have survived.

Jane read from Exodus this morning, the story of the Israelite people enslaved in Egypt, oppressed under ruthless taskmasters. But according to the story, a few women were brave enough to resist. When Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill any male babies born to the Hebrew women, the midwives disobeyed his authority and spared them, claiming that the Hebrew women gave birth so quickly that the midwives couldn't get there on time.

So Pharaoh ordered all his people to kill the Hebrew boys by throwing them in the Nile River. Moses' mother hid her baby for three months, and when she couldn't hide him any longer, she floated him in the river in a carefully built container, just around the time and place that Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe every day. When Pharaoh's daughter saw the baby, she said, "This must be one of the Hebrew's children," and promptly defied her father's command to kill. Instead she adopted the baby and raised him in her own home. And Moses grew up to lead his people to freedom.

In the reading from Romans this morning, Paul wrote, "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." To be conformed to this world means to be and act just like the world around us. But the women in the Exodus story were not "conformed to this world." They didn't simply follow orders and do what was expected of them. They answered to a higher calling. Why did they do it? It says that the midwives feared God. Their sense of responsibility to help another human being was more important to them than national duty. And Moses' mother followed her heart, as did Pharaoh's daughter, who took pity on the baby.

What would you do in that situation? Would you follow Pharaoh's orders, or would you care for a child in need? What do you do when the law or the voices of the culture tell you one thing, but it conflicts with what you understand to be good and right? For example, how should we treat men who enter this country illegally, knowing they are sending money back home to support their families? Or what should we do with the thousands of unaccompanied children who have been coming across our borders recently? How do we decide what is good and right?

Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world." Do not be molded and shaped by the standards and expectations of the world. But how? Some Christians believe it's simply a matter of personal morality. As long as we abstain from smoking and drinking, wear conservative clothing and hairstyles, save sex for marriage, and don't lie, cheat or steal, we must be following God's will. Other non-conformists might emphasize something different: eat only fair-trade organic food, and keep the thermostat down in winter and up in the summer.

But Paul was talking about much more than individual morals, or refraining from selfish behavior. He wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Christianity is not about abstaining from bad behavior or being good. It’s about transformation, a new way of thinking and being, re-orienting our minds and actions in relationship to God.

Now transformation doesn’t “just happen.” Paul started this whole chapter by saying, “I appeal to you... brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (your selves) as a living sacrifice ... to God...”

Back in the time that Paul wrote, people were still sacrificing animals to God in the temple. They would offer a pigeon, or goat or ox, once or twice a year, some dead meat, and that would be enough. But a living sacrifice would be different. It involves our whole lives, offering ourselves every day, to see the world through God’s eyes and to respond with faith, not matter what our culture says.

Some of our teenagers renewed their minds last week in Guatemala. One of them told me she found herself thinking and behaving differently there. Instead of what she said was her usual routine of acting lazy and refusing to cooperate, she was getting up in the morning, making her bed, and helping out. Another teen agreed saying she was amazed to find herself clearing other people’s plates and pitching in with whatever needed to be done without being asked. It just seemed to come naturally in this setting. They were thinking and acting in new ways. They felt transformed.

When you are with other people who give freely of themselves, and you feel part of something important, when you know you are serving God and helping to make a difference in the world, that can change your outlook on life. Suddenly work is not a burden, but a privilege. Suddenly you can see beyond your own needs and find joy in caring and helping others. You realize we are part of one body, and we each have something important to offer. When we offer it to God, that brings transformation. And when we are transformed with renewed minds, we are free to receive and free to give, and free to act according to God’s will.

Today we invite our students and teachers and everyone else who works as part of a school, to come forward for a blessing. Not everyone loves school, but many people in the world don’t have the chance to go to school at all, or their school ends after 4th or 5th grade. So we are grateful in this country to have the chance to learn to read and write, to count and calculate, to learn about the earth we live on, and be exposed to different cultures and ideas. It was a privilege to be able to help build a school so that children in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade could attend school in a remote village in Guatemala. We pray this for every child and young adult in the world.

So, if you are a student, teacher, principal, school nurse, guidance counselor, custodian, or any other kind of school worker, I invite you to come up now. And if you

have a backpack, or another symbol of your work, bring it with you, so we can pray for you.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we lift to you our students. They stand here ready to receive your blessings, and they commit themselves to study and learning in the school year ahead. We ask your blessing on each one of them.

And we pray your blessing on their backpacks. They will hold the work of each student, carried from home to school and back again. As our students carry these things with them, may they be reminded of the love and care of this congregation that surrounds them each school day.

And we pray for our teachers, administrators, coaches, nurses, guidance counselors, and all who support the work of our schools, colleges and universities. May they also be sustained by your blessing. May they be reminded that this congregations embraces their call to teaching and learning and surrounds them with love and care.

And we pray for the children of the world, that all children will have the opportunity to study and learn and grow to use their minds as well as their bodies in service to you. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.