

## Core Beliefs of a Revolutionary

August 20, 2006

Today we continue our preaching series on the core beliefs of a revolutionary Christian. I draw your attention to the text. It is taken from Romans, chapter 12, verse 2. It can be found in your sermon outline or your Bible, if it is helpful for you to follow along. I encourage you to hear anew the wonderful invitation that Paul offers on behalf of God. Listen very carefully. Hear the word of the Lord: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please?

Lord, in Your love and through Your grace, pour Your wisdom into our hearts this day, that we truly might be transformed into the image of Your love for the world. In Christ, Amen."

Have you heard of a bungee run? (It helps if you have teenagers at home. They really keep you on the cutting edge of our contemporary culture!) Apparently, one of the hottest party games now available to rent for teenage parties is called the bungee run. Let me describe it for you so you have a conception. Two lanes are created with inflatable dividers with an anchor point at one end. Two young people step into a harness system, kind of a variation of a parachute harness. There is a portion that goes around the torso, fastening with a belt, and one that comes across the shoulders, cinching at the chest. Attached to that there are bungee cords that go behind the player to the anchor point. At the starting cue, both young people start running, each armed with a baton that has Velcro on it. The object is to see how far they can actually go and plant the Velcro baton, before the bungee cord becomes taut and actually lifts them off their feet and throws them backwards. Sounds like fun, doesn't it? I can see it on your faces - you're just waiting until you're invited to one of those parties!

My son has a t-shirt that says across the top, "It's only funny until somebody gets hurt, then it's hilarious." I suppose you really have to see the kids straining, struggling, and pushing as hard as they can against the bungee cord only to fly backwards in order to fully appreciate the humor of the event, but you know something, I heard about it. My daughter came home from a party fairly bubbling over with enthusiasm. Now she weighs maybe 90 pounds soaking wet, so this was not her sport, clearly. But she came home excited and exhilarated, and shared with her daddy the adventure of this party; I listened to her and it sounds hilarious - it really does! We need to rent it here for one of our youth events so the kids can all experience it.

But you know what? A thought occurred to me. In a way, this game is almost a metaphor for our culture today: a contemporary rendering of the Myth of Sisyphus; always pushing the stone up, only to watch it roll back in frustration and despair. If you watch very carefully, it's not funny at all. All around us, we see people straining and struggling and reaching, only to feel dragged back - dragged down - by life. It's not funny at all, it's tragic, because God intends so much more for His children, which is Paul's invitation to us. Do not be conformed to this world. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Look around and you can clearly see evidence of how people conform to a culture that has lost touch with Christ. Watch the ads - see what Madison Avenue is doing. They don't sell beer; they sell robust, fun times with friends. They don't sell Cadillacs; they sell prestigious lifestyles. They don't sell clothes or toothpaste; they sell sex appeal. They would lead us to believe that if we drive the right car, drink the right beer, wear the right clothes, and live in the right house in the right

neighborhood, we will somehow be happy. We look around and see people struggling, straining, pulling, and hoping, only to be pulled back into a myth: a myth of life satisfaction that the world simply cannot offer. What makes it worse is that we live in a culture which has been inoculated against true Christianity.

So often, people go into churches which sound like the Democratic Party at prayer or worse yet, the Republican Party at prayer (allow me to be non-partisan about this!). We come to the conclusion - the erroneous conclusion - that simply because we live here in these great United States, we are, by definition, a Christian nation and a Christian people. Let me be clear about this: our zip code *never* determines our relationship with Christ. Only we do, and that is the invitation in the Scripture: to challenge the perceptions; to break free and be liberated of all that would bind us, tie us, and drag us down. For it is only when we do that, that God can truly lift us up. It is only when we choose not to be conformed to this world that we find that measure of peace, that sense of serenity and security, that awareness that life is a precious gift from God; only then that we understand that what matters most is how we live life in relationship with Him, reflecting His love to the world. That is the invitation offered by Paul: that we not be *conformed* to our world, but be *transformed* in the renewing of our minds by the power of Christ at work in our lives. What would that look like?

There are three core beliefs of a revolutionary Christian who would break free. Let's walk through those: personal faith in Christ; disciplined spiritual practices; and a countercultural view of the world that sees life differently because of the faith perspective. We must begin with the foundation, and build upon it. The foundation is personal faith in Christ. I would draw your attention to Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8-10. Listen very carefully to what Paul wrote: "For by grace you have been saved through faith - and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Our salvation is dependent upon Christ, and Christ is Lord and Savior - the only Son of God - who came and lived and made the way of the cross be for us an invitation to life.

Now I watch very carefully the shows where they interview folk, because it's crucial to be attuned to the pulse of the populous, in order to know what people are thinking. There is a very disturbing trend emerging in our culture today in relation to Christianity. When people of today are asked about Jesus Christ, more often than not, they describe Him as a wise man, a good teacher, a prophet, a lover, and a healer. While all those things are true, they do not come close to capturing the very heart and essence of who Christ is. For here is the simple choice: either Jesus was Christ, the Son of God, or he was crazy. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot dilute the man down to the lowest common denominator and suggest that He was nothing more than a good teacher. He was and is so much more than that. In fact, either He was Christ or his claims are ludicrous and he was obviously crazy! You cannot "split the difference" or "find the middle ground". You *must* make a choice: if He is Christ, then allow Him to be Master of your life, changing and shaping the way you live; if he is merely a good teacher, then who cares anyway? Let's name it for what it is.

We can rely on the witness and testimony of people who knew Him, for we have the Word - that is the scripture - that recounts for us the eyewitness accounts of those who knew and loved and experienced Christ as risen Lord. We have His words. He told us that He would make the way of the cross be the way of life. He told us that He would die and be raised from death to life. He showed us the power of God's love in His life, not only in the healing and raising the dead to life, but in His dramatic resurrection, which is our hope and promise for the future. Either Jesus is Lord or he is nothing. A revolutionary Christian perspective requires us to choose. You choose.

The second core belief is this: if Christ is Lord and Master of our lives, then we are called to disciplined spiritual practices. Paul was writing to Timothy (First letter of Timothy, Fourth chapter, verses 14-15), and he said something dramatic. Listen very carefully to what Paul said: “Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the Counsel of Elders. Put these things into practice; devote yourself to them so that all may see your progress.”

I had a breakfast meeting on Thursday at Atlanta Bread Company. Do you ever go there for breakfast? It felt like a Methodist prayer meeting, there were so many Methodists there! (There were a few Baptists, too!) I saw so many people I knew, it was a great experience! Anyway, I was there having a breakfast meeting, and Steve Parker was in the restaurant. (Do you know Steve Parker? He’s a good member of our church, and is involved in our mission program.) He stopped by the table to tell me the story about his daughter, a first year teacher at the elementary level, whose classes have already begun. She began her class by telling her students that they were going to create an atmosphere where everybody could learn, and their task was to make sure that as students, they didn’t prevent anyone else from learning, because that would break their teacher’s heart and she would cry. Later, after the day was in full swing, some boys and girls started to talk, chatting while Steve’s daughter was teaching. One little girl stood up and said, “Shh, shhh! Be quiet! You are going to break teacher’s heart, and she will cry!” That little girl understood what it meant to get in the way of learning.

I wonder if sometimes we don’t break God’s heart, truly. Don’t you wonder that? God has blessed us with such extraordinary gifts, and I do not think there is anything more heartbreaking than to see a gift go to waste. You know what I’m talking about. You see it with the potential that some people have. Some people are such natural musicians, for instance. They just sit down and play and it sounds magnificent, but here is what’s amazing. If they don’t practice discipline, they never reach their full potential. They have a natural gift that may put them far about average, but it’s only when they devote themselves to developing that gift that they become truly something extraordinary, revealing the full potential that God created within them. Pablo Casals, the magnificent musician, practiced scales hours every day, from the time he was 6 until he was 96, when he died. When asked why, he once said, “Because it is the foundation of all great music.” Now is it any different with the gift that God has entrusted to you? Is it? Imagine the impact we would have if we were to put ourselves at God’s disposal and allow Him to work in and through us.

During the greeting, I talked to Ray and Jane. They just returned from spending a month in New Orleans working for Habitat for Humanity, rebuilding homes. Imagine what would happen if that kind of attitude of acquiescence toward God began to really catch on! Imagine how it would be if we opened our hearts and lives and said, “Lord, use me! You have entrusted with me sacred gifts, and I want to develop them to their full potential.” What would that require? First of all, it would require spending daily time with God in prayer, stilling the noise of the world so His voice can be heard; not filling the stillness with everything we have to say. So often, I find myself falling into the trap of wanting to give God good counsel – “God, you really ought to do this” - and then it dawns on me that what’s really necessary is for me to be quiet and listen, so God can tell me what is His divinely wise counsel. Listen for God’s voice on a daily basis: pray, practice the discipline.

By the same token, we cannot *just* be praying to God - we must allow the scripture to shape our conversations with Him. If we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that there are some

conversations we will not have with God unless we are prompted, and the scripture guides us. For it is through the Bible - the most realistically, divinely inspired book ever written – that God leads us through all the challenges of life and shows us the example. We must also come together as a community of faith, because that is really the way we are stretched. Were we not here this morning, we might not have heard the story of Ray and Jane, who did something extraordinary with a month of their time. Because of them, some here might begin to think, “Imagine the difference we could make in Caruthersville if we begin sending mission trips down there to help them recover from the tornado damage.” We begin to realize all that is possible when we come together as a body of Christ, with disciplined spiritual practices. But, to make it all work, we need the countercultural view that Paul challenges us to have. He wrote in Romans 12, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by it.” What does that mean?

The book I have been recommending to everyone of late is by Heifetz and Linsky, entitled Leadership on the Line. It is simply outstanding! In one chapter of the book, they invite people who care about leadership to take a “balcony perspective” - to climb off the stage of life, stepping back far enough to afford ourselves a measure of objectivity. I propose that, in so doing, we must scrutinize carefully three things. First of all, we must study our past, because our past does influence our present and our future. Examine your past and make sure that you are not carrying any unresolved baggage. If there are people you need to forgive, then forgive them. Otherwise, you will carry that pain until you do. If there are people whose forgiveness you need to seek, seek it from them, so that you can experience that freedom. If they have already died, then go to God, seeking His forgiveness, and accept the freedom that He readily offers when we do so.

I feel a need to offer some caution here, for though we must look to our past and consider the circumstances of our lives, there is a balance we must seek to strike. So many people today blame their parents or their circumstances, as if we lived in a deterministic culture, in which we can only be what others create us to be. That’s not biblical. God created us to be free, and that means coming to the point where we recognize and acknowledge that our parents did the very best they could in their circumstances, and that their mistakes no longer bind us. We are not trapped in a perpetual bungee run. Let go of those portions of your past that are burdens and scars on your present, and hold tightly to that which is good and precious. Cling to those memories that reveal you at your very best, as God intended; to those recollections that depict the love that touched and shaped you. Recall those, and keep them fresh, telling the story of your life in a way that celebrates how God’s love is revealed in your life.

Next, stop and take a look at your present life. Are you where you want to be, truly? Have you bought in to the cultural malaise that says if you have - if you accumulate - you will be happy? If you do, you are doomed to despair and misery. Take a look at your present, and if your relationship with God is not all that you hope it to be, then *do* something about it! If your relationship with your spouse is not satisfying, *do* something about it! If your relationship with your children or your parents or your friends could be better, it is within your power to reshape your present. If you do that now, it will change the trajectory of your future.

Which, of course, brings us to the third area of our lives we must consider - the future. For it is only when we study, acknowledge, and move on from our past and then examine and reshape our present, that we can have the future God intends for us - a future *not* conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds to live in God’s will. That’s what it means to begin to

hold a biblical perspective on life. It is radically countercultural, but if you embrace it, you will be set free to be what God intends.

Next Sunday I won't be here. I'm flying back to Wassau, Wisconsin, my home town, on Friday. I'm flying back to go to the church in which I was raised, Wesley United Methodist Church, because they are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on their site "at the top of the hill". They have invited me to come back and preach as part of the celebration, and I'm going. My mother still belongs to that church, my sister plays the organ there, and there are still people I know in the congregation. However, one of the main reasons I'm going is that one of the primary influences on my life, and one of the significant reasons I'm a pastor today, was at Wesley during my formative years. Earlier in the service, you will recall, we consecrated and dedicated the Sunday school teachers. Every time we do that, I think of Margaret Ponco, who was my Sunday school teacher for years. You wonder why she was my Sunday school teacher for years? You see, there was a group of four boys - Michael Paulson, Lee Stroda, Brian Barnettski, and Jim Priesig - all of whom were somewhat mischievous. (I know you can't believe that!) Actually, it was Michael Paulson who was the chief mischief maker! OK, it was all of us, and Margaret Ponco took as her mission - her ministry - to be the Sunday school teacher year after year for our class. Isn't that neat? And she was an elderly woman then. She died just three years ago, in her upper 90s. She used to send me a Christmas card every year.

I remember a particular poster that always resided in her classroom. It was one of those goofy things that was common in the 60s. The poster had bars on it, and in bold print, with an illumined Bible in the front, said, "If it were against the law to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" And somehow, some way, Margaret Ponco would periodically weave that into our lessons. It would have been very easy with that group of boys for her to have become very frustrated and angry; to throw in the towel and to stop teaching; or to be rather rude, unkind, and unloving to us lads. And yet, she never gave in to that impulse. Instead, she simply loved us and invited us to experience the life that she had found. And so, next Sunday, I'm going to honor Margaret Ponco and celebrate her life, her ministry, and the impact she's had on so many. Because Margaret brought a true countercultural perspective - a biblical perspective - to life and to church, and because of it, I'm a different man today than I might have been.

Now imagine what would happen in this world if you truly became a revolutionary Christian. Visualize the impact your life could have if you put your faith and trust in Christ as Lord and allowed Him to be Master. Engage yourself in the spiritual disciplines so that He truly can shape your heart and your life. Then, step back to seek a measure of divine objectivity and ask, "Lord, how would you change me?" With that spirit, God won't just change you; God will change the world. Amen.

Pray with me please: Lord, thank You for the privilege of worshipping You. Thank You, Lord, for the privilege of living within Your love, for You would set us free; You would allow us to be all that You intend. Lord, today we choose to no longer be conformed to the world, but instead to be transformed by Your love, ours in Christ, Amen.