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The Christian Non-Conformist

Romans 12: 1-2

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This past Monday, one of my favorite comedians died. George Carlin was 71 when he died of heart failure, and he was one of three comedians that all I have to do is look at them and I start laughing. I remember back in college hearing for the first time his piece on the differences between football and baseball, thinking that this was one of the great comedy bits and takes on the English language I'd ever heard; and I still think that is so.

Carlin was a controversial figure, not only because of his famous or infamous routine of the "Seven Words You Can't Say on TV." He was controversial because he would tackle anything, any issue, getting right to the heart of it and then give it his amazingly creative and usually hilarious spin on it. For me, he was funny as all get out, brilliant at the way he looked at simple and very complex things; things most of us hold dear and even the most taboo subjects, and then he would dissect it until it was laid bare and then he'd go to work on it. And, his love for and use of the English language was amazing. I didn't agree with him on a lot of things. He had a very, very skeptical view of religion and God, often taking on religious faith in his routines and frankly, trashing it. I have no clue if he believed in God but I am certain that he didn't believe in the God of popular theology, especially when it came to fundamentalism.

Be that as it may be, I loved Carlin because he was a non-conformist. He would not be bound by what had been and certainly not by what the prevailing culture or powers that be might have to say about things. He was always someone who "got under your skin" about things because, as a non-conformist, you could never categorize or put a label on him, and often, he would critique or criticize some of your most cherished beliefs and always, there was a large kernel of truth in whatever he had to say.

On Monday night, watching Larry King Live whose guests were talking about George Carlin, my mind turned to the first two verses of chapter 12 in the book of Romans. And as I did, I thought of the sign I used to read as a kid as we left the Detroit Baptist Camp which has a paraphrase of this verse:

"Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold."

It's the same verse that campers and families read on the small sign when they leave Camp Wightman. But I wonder if most of us ever consider that these words of Paul are, perhaps, the most dangerous in the whole Bible? When he writes, "Don't be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," he's telling his readers this: "don't do what you naturally do as part of your culture. Your whole mindset, your entire worldview must be changed, radically altered so that you see things differently and therefore live differently." This is an invitation to be a nonconformist and it's all the more dangerous because what he's saying is that with this radically different way of looking at life, you make an intentional choice to not conform to the ways of your culture. And in any culture where conformity is valued, not to do so is likely to get you into trouble.

So, what we're dealing with here is something that is counter-culture, no matter what time or place may be in, and it causes, not surprisingly, quite a bit of tension. Tension, obviously, because if you claim to be a Christian say, in America, and try to live like Paul's talking about in our country that claims to be based on Christian principles, you're not going to be well-received. Why should you live differently than what mother culture says if what culture is all about is what you believe? Why would the roots of our society need to be challenged? Who knows? But we do know that there is tension between what Romans says and what most Christians actually believe because of one simple fact: most of us, including yours truly, read scripture within our own circles of faith and interpretation and we all have particular lenses through which we read scripture and understand the Christian life. And so, our conformity or nonconformity has to do primarily with the current prevailing opinion and practice of communities of which we are a part. Therefore, what is considered Godly conduct is what the people of God say it is at any particular time.

Now, that may seem like a harsh indictment of us Christians, you and me, but "how else does one explain the fact that the Bible and the church is used much more often to preserve the status quo rather than to challenge and change it?" (From an article in the Spring, 2008 Yale Divinity School bulletin by Peter Gomes)

Do you remember Jesus? Do you remember what one of the charges shouted against him at his trial before Pilate when the Roman Procurator wanted to free him? You can't release him; "He stirs up the people!" The same thing happened to the apostles and to Paul – they were introducing all sorts of new and different and disturbing things into the prevailing culture – and so, they were beaten, imprisoned, and eventually, most were killed. Listen to what Hebrews 11:37 says about what the early Christian nonconformists suffered:

"They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented. . . ."

Quite an image, wouldn't you say? The people in the Bible called people of faith, are usually depicted as those whose loyalty to their faith places them on the outside of the prevailing culture. They are people on the margins who are, in the words of Jesus, "in

the world but not of the world.” Can we say the same thing about us Christians in America – today?

Have you ever heard of Joe Francis? Francis is now an environmental activist who, in 1971, after witnessing a collision of two oil tankers in San Francisco Bay, decided that he would stop using motorized transport – and then, several months later, decided to stop talking. Between 1973 and 1990, he made only one exception: to tell his parents how much he loved them. During those 17 years, Francis discovered not only the beauty of silence, but its effectiveness. “Because I didn’t speak, everybody paid attention,” he says. He studied environmental law and became a local celebrity who toured for lengthy periods to “speak” with everyone and anyone about important issues facing the world, our country and his community, using all different ways of communication.

An interesting thing about Francis is this: he led a relatively “normal” life and didn’t withdraw from society as some do who take a vow of silence. His was a nonconformist way of being and living, right in the heart of our culture. He once joked that his girlfriend thought it was “rather nice that I kept my mouth shut. . . . [My reason] for holding my tongue was born out of compassion for others. I used to talk a lot, and for most of my adult life I had not been listening fully. I only listened long enough to determine whether the speaker’s ideas matched my own. If they didn’t, I would stop listening and my mind would race ahead to compose an argument against what I believed the speaker’s idea to be. . . .” But his intentional nonconformity changed him; he had, in Paul’s words, a “renewal of his mind.” “Silence,” he wrote in a book of those 17 years, “is not just not talking; . . . [it’s] standing on the edge of silence, hearing things you’ve never heard before, and you hear these things in ways you’ve never heard them before.”

Wouldn’t that be a wonderful, non-conforming way of living in our culture of constant noise and rising levels of public debate about important issues in life where very few really listen? What possibilities for personal and social transformation could there be if we really listened? What about in your own relationships?

It’s important for us to recognize, I believe, that Paul was not inviting social revolution with his call for nonconformity and transformation. Perhaps Romans 12: 1-2 was his desire, and his principle was one of nonconformity. However, if you keep reading this letter, you’ll find that in the next chapter, he calls his listeners to be obedient to the governing authorities (see Romans 13). That, I am convinced was Paul’s way of expedience because his was a situation similar to Christian slaves in America who, in order to survive, had to give outward obedience to their masters. Even so, they knew that to conform to the slave culture was to die a spiritual, emotional and psychological death, and so their real survival depended upon their ability to be loyal to a Greater Someone else. They made a distinction between Who was their REAL Master and who held a horsewhip.

People of faith who are oppressed by the powers that be often do that, and it is a very difficult thing to do. But the problem with Christian faith and nonconformity is not when Christians are in a minority or an oppressed group in society – suffer though they might. The problem comes when Christians become powerful, when we are in the

majority and have the capacity to oppress and/or impress our will upon others. And that is one of the great ironies whenever the Christian community gains worldly power: we have always lost our capacity to critique the very power we hold. That's as true of us in America today as it was in post-Constantine Rome or medieval Europe or even Czarist Russia.

When I consider our society today, I'm stunned by what we Christians – no, I'm not going to say “we Christians;” I will say THIS particular Christian, ME – I'm stunned by what I either tacitly and vocally approve of, or by way of my silence I affirm: Torture; War; Pornography, especially child porn; materialism that is idolatrous; the plundering of God's planet; a higher infant mortality rate in many US cities than most 3rd world countries; a media saturated with garbage; and I could go on and on. Where are we, Christian nonconformists? Where is the transformation of our “minds,” our mind-set, our worldview (or, as some of us would say, our cosmology)? Our way of looking at life and living our faith?

Indeed, this is radical stuff, this reading the Bible, especially this piece from Paul. So, the question comes, what might a Christian nonconformist look like today? Well, I don't think like George Carlin, though we could use a little of his way of things. Put it this way: what are some things one would not conform to today and do something about them? Well, I am not smart enough, creative enough or a deep enough thinker to even come close to answering those questions fully, but here's my very short and incomplete list. Three things.

First, a Christian nonconformist would refuse to accept the rampant and idolatrous consumerism in our world. Economic growth and consumption is not unquestionably good, as we take for granted. We have raised MORE on a pedestal: consume more, produce more, we must have economic growth; it is the only way our economy can keep going – more, more, more. We received a tax rebate check to buy more stuff to jumpstart the economy, keep it growing. It is an unchallenged orthodoxy in our country and maybe at one time, that orthodoxy was OK, but it's not anymore. The planet, God's planet, is finite and places limits on our behavior which we cannot escape. If we continue to make our economies and our population ever larger, if we continue to consume more and more and more, not only will the planet become more and more impoverished but our souls will be, too. MORE may be what society says is good, but what happens if there comes a transformation of our minds, a whole new way of looking at things? Could we be more faithful, then, to the One who said, “Go, sell everything you have, give it to the poor and follow me”?

Secondly, a Christian nonconformist would love his or her country so much so that she or he would criticize it when it was not living up to the high ideals of justice, freedom and equal opportunity for all. I say this because when we confess “Jesus is Lord,” we're making another radical claim: Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, not the US government, not any particular political system or economic system or legal system; Jesus is. And not just in our individual, spiritual lives. That's what got him into such trouble and his first followers; they proclaimed that another kingdom takes precedent over Rome – right now! – that the ways of God must be lived out in our day to day lives, and when those clash with the ways of any country or government or economic system,

no matter how much we love it or believe in them, God's ways MUST be our Way. That's why Jesus' first followers called themselves people of the Way.

Finally, Christian nonconformists would reject Christian exclusiveness. I say this because when we believe that only Christians or only Christians with a particular doctrinal stripe, have access to God, two thousand years of claiming that God's ways are not our ways and that the mind of God is vastly different from our own minds, gets tossed out the window. If God is the God of all, and not just some tribal deity, then God has made a way, not known to us, perhaps, for the healing and care of all creation and not our little part of it.

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Radical stuff, what we find in the Bible, isn't it? Here's the good news for the nonconformist Christian: God is greater than and more loving than the best of those of us who profess to know and serve him. This was and remains the message of Jesus who was a radical nonconformist against the powers of his age. He both taught it and lived it and finally, it cost him his life. Will we have the courage and the faith to seek this transformation of our whole selves and follow him wherever he may lead?