

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
8/23/2020 - 12th Sunday after Pentecost-16 A  
St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

***Romans 12: 1-8; Matthew 16:13-10***

**'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.' †**

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Once again we hear from Paul's great theological work, his letter to the Roman Church... with its allegory that we are 'The Body of Christ,' that is— Christ's eyes and ears, hands and feet, mouth in this world— and that we each have an individual and distinct role to play, whether as servant, or teacher, or prophet, or minister. Remember that 'theology' is 'faith seeking understanding' (as simply defined by Sts. Augustine and Anselm—*fides quaerens intellectum*). We, as members of Christ's Body, the Church, are all seeking to understand what it is we are called to do by God.

In the Gospel passage for today, we hear of Peter's remarkable confession of faith; a scene that made him the principle apostle, according to tradition. He proclaims to Jesus, "you are the Savior, the Son of the living God." And Jesus makes this a moment for teaching about the declaration... he tells Peter and the other apostles, 'this is not the product of human reasoning (what flesh and blood may reveal) it is a gift from my Father in heaven. Take this concept back to the letter to the Romans, which says 'be transformed by the renewal of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God...' This points to the difference between human reasoning (or logical/ deductive reasoning) and discernment. We have all had to make multiple, sometimes complex and difficult decisions, and most of us are quite used to human logical reasoning. I was taught a method by my father that I am sure all of you know: when you are trying to decide whether to do something or buy something, get a large piece of paper, draw a line down the middle, then write 'Pro' on the left and 'Con' on the right. You then list all of the good things about the decision in the column on the left and the bad things on the right; in the end, the longest list wins and your decision is made! I've done that when buying a car, considering a move and new home.

And today we hear Paul appeal to us to do something different when it comes to our faith and our work within the Church... we are asked to discern. Discernment involves considering all the same risks, perhaps even making a list of pros & cons. Yet once the list is made, no decision is made, instead it is offered to God in prayer. In a process of patient, often long, correspondence with God through prayer, one starts to get an answer. Discernment is a means through which many qualities that are obscured or concealed by human reasoning are brought out to us as 'pro' ... remember Jesus words, "for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven."

I can tell you that some of the greatest decisions I've made in my life (my marriage, my decision to become a priest) would never have turned out as they did, if I relied on logical human reasoning (frankly the list of cons far outweighed the pros). It took long periods of wrestling and arguing with God to finally agree to them. And, my life would never have

been as good as it has been unless I let go of control and listened to God's will for my life... and it was freeing!

Now, of course, good thinking is important and a sign of faithfulness. Not to use our brains or utilize our gifts & talents in ways that connect us with one another would be wrong. The goal is to maintain a balance between God's grace and human initiative. If we do this, we will be able to allow God to take our gifts and transform them into what is "good, acceptable, and perfect" (Ro 12.2b).

I can't help but wonder how this applies to us during this time of racial and political division in our nation... in this time when people seem more intent of hate and attacking, than working together. I found the words of the late Dr Martin Luther King, the great civil rights leader, to be exemplary of maintaining that balance between human action and discerning God's will—

Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability, it comes through the timeless efforts of men [*sic*] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. <sup>1</sup>

So... "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice"... May you "discern what is the will of God." May we all discern, during this time of vulnerability and apparent social stagnation, and try to follow what God has in mind for each of us. Let's develop new ways of thinking, new ways of relating, and new ways of acting, that our community of St. Mark's may stand in contrast to the ways of the world, and do what is good and acceptable and perfect. †

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, (New York: Signet Classics, 2000); p74.