

As We Think, So We Become
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Romans 12:1-2, 9-18
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There is a line from Paul's Letter to the Romans which was read at the beginning of our service that I want to re-call to your attention. It says, "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."

Several years ago, at a regional church gathering, I sat across the table from two women who were talking about the freedom of thought we have in the United Church of Christ and whether we are free to believe or not believe whatever we want. The conversation eventually ended with one woman assuring the other that it really didn't matter what one thought because everyone was welcome in the United Church of Christ anyhow.

The woman was right in saying everyone is welcome in the UCC, but is it true that we can believe whatever we want? Could not some thoughts be a contradiction of who we are as a people of God, leading us to become something other than what we know ourselves called to be? If people in general were free to believe whatever they wanted, would the Apostle Paul have felt it necessary to urge his people not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds so that they could discern what is the will of God—*what is good and acceptable and perfect?*

The Buddha said that we are shaped by our thoughts; that we become what we think. Ghandi, centuries later, inferred the same thing when he said, "A man is but the product of his thoughts; what he thinks he becomes." John Locke insisted that, "Our behavior is the best interpreter of our thoughts." If these people are right, then what we think matters— *it matters a lot!* For, as we think, so we become.

You are all familiar, I'm sure, with that TV ad featuring Samuel L. Jackson promoting the Capital One credit card. After extolling the money-back features of the card, Jackson turns to the camera and, in an almost threatening tone, demands to know of the viewer, "What's in your wallet?" I believe the times we're living in demand a new kind of question. It's not, "What's in your wallet?" but *What's in your head?* What are you thinking about these days? Because as you think, so you will become.

Many of us have been made to sit up and pay attention this year as a certain political candidate has, "Opened his mind" to what he's thinking about, because some of his thinking is downright scary and even Un-Christian. Now I know I just got done saying that there was no *creed or test of faith* in the UCC, but in fact, there is one for Christianity, and it's universal: What we *think*, and therefore *act upon* as Christians is to be in accord with the mind of Jesus. And how do we determine the mind of Jesus? We turn to the words and teachings of Jesus himself—and to other witnesses in the New Testament like the Apostle Paul. Listen to what the

latter wrote to his fellow Christians in Philippi: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:1-5)

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” No one stood outside the circle of Jesus’ love and concern. He was not a divider; he was a reconciler. He did not build walls between people; he tore them down and built bridges to connect folks. He did not look with enmity upon those who persecuted him; he loved and forgave them instead. He did not return evil for evil, but sought to overcome evil with good. Within the mind of Jesus was neither resentment nor revenge; neither jealousy nor envy; neither pride nor prejudice. There was a reason his earliest followers referred to him as “Lord” and “Christ.” It was because in his face they saw the face of God, from his lips they heard the word of God, and through his mind they were brought into the presence of God.

Today our thinking is bombarded by external messaging 24/7. From the moment we wake up, turn on our phones and the TV, read the morning paper, and converse with the first person we meet, we are subjected to an endless flow of information, argument, and tabloid rumor—some of which is just plain stupid! Along with factual information comes tons of disinformation, often spread by disgruntled bloggers who draw dangerous conclusions based on scanty, often false, and incomplete data, which is then scattered in all directions by twitter, tweet and letters to the editor as if it were the gospel truth, and is often supported by leaders and politicians who should, and frequently do, know better. Is it any wonder, then, that when we sit down to think or lie down to sleep, the unwelcome thoughts that often crowd into our minds are not of our own choosing?

Nevertheless, if it’s true that we become what we think, then we’ve got to be careful about what we allow into our heads. We’ve got to be concerned with what wriggles its way into our brain like a worm into an apple and reject certain messages in order to let in other kinds. We’ve got to be intentional about who and what we are in dialogue with, and as parents and grandparents, we’ve got to be concerned with what our children are tuned into, as well. If this sounds like censorship, maybe it is. But it’s a self-imposed censorship that I’m talking about. Because what we think matters—it matters a lot. *For as we think, so we become.*

There was a time when a lot more people were exposed to *the mind of Jesus* than there are now. Some fifty years ago, most Americans were unwaveringly and overwhelmingly religious. But between 1961 and 1996, church attendance in the United States fell off by half. Since 1990, the percentage of all Americans who identify themselves as Christians has fallen 10 points, while the percentage of people who claim they are unaffiliated with any particular faith at all has doubled, and the number of those willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased about fourfold. Somewhere between 25 and 30 percent of all adults under thirty now claim no religious affiliation at all. My own children, and therefore sadly, my grandchildren as well, are among the non-affiliated who have no church ties. If these trends continue at the current pace, the *non-religious* and the *other-religious* will outnumber Christians in the United States by the year 2041.

Many people have turned their backs on the church and Christianity and have walked away because they can no longer embrace with their hearts what their minds will not believe. They think they've tried Christianity and have found it wanting, when the truth may be that they have only rejected their own outgrown, outworn, Sunday school answers from childhood. Peering through glasses clouded by simplistic answers and unhappy memories, they turn their childhood faith out to pasture like a lame and worthless horse and begin to look elsewhere for the gods they will serve. Some get caught up in their own hedonistic pursuit of wealth, comfort, and personal indulgence, neglecting all civic, religious, and political obligations for the sake of *the good life* which begins and ends with them. And as they think, so they become.

There are others, however, whose thinking leads them down a very different path. Talia Lemman from Des Moines, Iowa, spearheaded a project when she was ten years old that eventually brought \$10 million in relief to Hurricane Katrina victims. At 11, she set up a mini-United Nations to work with 70 delegates to raise \$26,000 to build a school in rural Cambodia for 300 children. At 13, she is currently multitasking on such projects as setting up a national task force to help rebuild stricken communities through Habitat for Humanity, designing and selling peace bracelets for nations in turmoil, and unifying schools to sell their own labeled water to raise funds for water pumps in Africa.

Talia is one of many kids nationwide who say they are “addicted” to helping others. A recent study of 2,000 kids found that nine out of ten of the 2,000 surveyed said it is “extremely, very, or somewhat important” to help others and to give back to their communities. Ellen Sabin, author of *The Giving Book*, says that, “Children often make better social-action changers than adults. They don't start with a negative idea that they can't make an impact or something is too big for them . . . They start with the idea that they can have an impact, which means more likely they will try to and they will.”

The study also reported that children follow suit when their parents volunteer. Only two percent of children participate in service if parents are inactive, whereas fifty-two percent participate when they are joined by their families. Forty-five percent of those surveyed got involved through school, while thirty-five percent joined with their church, synagogue or mosque. These kids think *service*, and as they think, so they become.

I met another one of those people in a jail cell in Washington, DC at the height of the Vietnam War some forty years ago. Three dozen of us had been arrested during a protest against the war. Unlike many demonstrators of that day, we were a relatively timid group of preachers and priests and that first night in jail passed with an unbearable slowness. Muffled voices from other cells could occasionally be heard; and steel doors clanging in a distant corridor were often accompanied by the barked order of guards. Otherwise, an eerie stillness filled the darkness of the jail.

At some point during the night, someone in an adjoining cell began to sing, softly at first, until his resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he picked up the lyrics from Handel's *Messiah*: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” Soon he was singing as if Isaiah himself had returned to earth to speak for God. Others in the cell block began to join their voices with his: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.” He knew all the words, and he

knew the music, and the power in his voice soon swept us all into a state of prayer, unprecedented in its power to transform the darkness. Together, we experienced the demanding yet consoling force of our most deeply held conviction: God is real. God exists for you and me. God's love embraces the whole world. "King of kings, and Lord of lords, and he shall reign for ever and ever."

Prior to that night in 1972, William Sloan Coffin had been a stranger to me, someone I had heard about and had seen from a distance. That night he became as real to me as our relationship would become over the next thirty-four years until his death in 2006. As senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, he became my pastor, mentor and dearest friend, and I never ceased to marvel at his passion for the gospel or his commitment to live out its ethical precepts in every dimension of his life. His deeply held convictions took him to the battlefield of every injustice where he laid his life on the line for the sake of what he thought, believed in, and was willing to die for. He was an unforgettable example of one who became the very essence of what he thought, believed, and cared about.

Talia and Bill and millions of other kids and adults down through the ages have all refused to be conformed to the ways of the world, and have instead been transformed through the renewal of their minds, thereby discerning what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. They knew that what a person thinks, matters.

It matters a lot. For as we think, so we become. May our minds also mirror the will and purpose of God on earth, and may our *becoming* always be in fulfillment of who we have been created to be.

Amen.