

## **Do Not Be Conformed**

Rev. John Allen

Its graduation season. And that means... graduation speeches!

Now of course things are a little different this year. These speeches are recorded, or otherwise delivered remotely.

I have to admit that I don't remember any thing from the speakers at any my three graduations. Which in many ways is because once you get to that point, years of study, papers, and exams, its hard to take in much else other than the joy of the day.

But I chose today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans partially because it kind of sounds like a stereotypical graduation speech.

These are his words to the church in Rome. A church which he has sent forth to make disciples of Jesus. And he cannot help himself but go through an exhaustive and frankly *exhausting* list of exhortations, recommendations, and reminders.

He hits the highlights:

Be humble, remember that we belong to each other, everyone do your part, love what is good, hate what is evil, be hopeful, persevere when the going gets tough.

My favorite, "do not lag in zeal" Pray, give, bless, rejoice, weep, love your enemies....

It comes across with the kind of hurried desperation of a parent whose kid is taking the car out for the first time, shouting a 15 second drivers ed refresher after their treasured-one as they hurry down the driveway.

Don't text, don't go too fast, wear your seatbelt, be home by 10, be careful!

A lot of graduation speeches are kind of like that too, just one last shot at everything we really hoped would sink in over these past many years. Shouted after you as you head for the door.

But, if you look closely at Paul's words, there is one phrase that holds the key to the whole thing. It comes right at the beginning.

"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."

"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."

The rest is all really commentary on that.

And this is what I would like to say to all our graduates as they pass through this moment of great transition.

But really, it is my message to all of us.

“Do not be conformed to this world. 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.

Every one of us walks through the world with thousands of forces, some quite strong, some quite subtle, shaping us, nudging us, corralling us into a certain way of seeing the world and a certain way of living our lives.

And if we live unconsciously, and un-attentively, there is almost this default mode that we will end up in.

If we live unconsciously, and un-attentively, we will become self-interested. Consuming without regard for our neighbors or our planet, always chasing the next, the better, the bigger, the faster, the newer...

If we live unconsciously, and un-attentively, we will lose our imagination and find ourselves using phrases like “well, I guess that’s just the way things are.”

And if we live unconsciously, and un-attentively, it will be easy for others to get us to go along with things, to accept things, that we might otherwise know are wrong.

Because we have conformed to the world. We have become ourselves so identified with the status quo that cannot critically view things as though from the outside looking in.

To be a Christian is, as Paul says, to avoid conforming to the world, and instead to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may see and discern what is the will of God.

To be a Christian is to always be a little bit of a stranger to the way things are, to not be so absorbed in the systems and structures of the world that we can no longer step back and view them with a little objectivity.

To be a Christian is to know that we owe our first obedience not to a company, our a country, or a party, but to God. And that we must work— through the regular practice of our faith— to keep God’s voice at the center of our lives so that our values are sturdy, and that instead of the world changing us, we change the world.

I hope that is what I am seeing right now as calls for racial justice are coming from corners of society where we have not heard them before.

I hope that I am seeing cracks a status quo that accepted the sin racism and the legacy of white supremacy as unchangeable facts of life.

I hope that the voices I am hearing arise are voices that have decided not to let the world shape them, but who have decided to themselves be shapers of a bolder and more imaginative future.

This is what I hope for you, class of 2020.

This is what I hope for all of us.

That we will always listen for the still-speaking voice of our living God. Because God is always imagining a future better than we can dream of.

I hope that we will always listen for God, who strives each day to make us vessels carrying peace, justice, love, and hope into the world.

I hope, I pray, that you will change the world. And not the other way around.