

New Pathways of Spirit and Life

A newborn baby's brain is an incredible thing. When our first child was born, we were amazed to learn that in her first two years she would form more neural pathways than she would for the rest of her life.

That was great news, until I thought about what happens to our brains for every year after that. It was sobering to think that even then – I was 34 at the time – my brain was already on the downward slide. Sure, wisdom might be gained through age and experience, but the brain as an organ more or less peaked at an early age.

But I've learned since that the scientific community has shifted somewhat, and the concept of neuroplasticity has emerged: the idea that the brain really does (to some extent) renew and strengthen in certain ways as we age, if we are willing to put in the work and even take care of ourselves a bit. Sure, it's a lot easier to learn a foreign language or a musical instrument when we are children, but it's not impossible (even for older adults) and doing so will in fact make our minds more resilient and more adaptable. Sure, we might be set in our ways of seeing the world, but once we realize that that's simply a choice that we make, we see that we really can be open to new things...and that it's not actually all that hard!

I'm oversimplifying here, but the idea of neuroplasticity means that our minds are *not as made up* as we think, and that the spiritual growth that's at the heart of our faith has a God-given biological component to it: we really can grow and renew, and we are in fact hard-wired to do it. It seems to me that Paul, two thousand years ago, would have been very comfortable with this idea. In fact, I get the impression from today's lection that our growth in Christ absolutely depends upon it.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, *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...* Do not be *conformed* to this world, but be transformed by the *renewing of your minds*. What a curious contrast Paul draws here, between being conformed to the world around us, and being in a lifelong process of renewal so that we can be open to the wildness of the Holy Spirit.

Our world is filled with temptations away from God, little seductions that convince us that we are at the center of things, that we have everything figured out. Our lives are filled with distractions that hide from our eyes both the injustices of the world and the sublime joys that are at the heart of a life centered on Christ. Yet so we often choose to *conform* to these things (which when you think about it means taking a boundless spirit and cramming it into a lifeless mold), rather than choose a life of renewal.

A life of conformity is kind of a deformed thing, isn't? Our souls are formless, shaped far more by mystery than by convention. A life of conformity is incredibly static. It's passive at best, and reactive at worst. But perhaps the saddest part living our lives conformed to things that are not of God is that it represents the willing surrender of our freedom and dignity to something that is not holy, not life-giving, not rooted in God's generous spirit.

Yet as passive as conformity can be, the renewal of our minds is the exact opposite: it is an active and lively process, it is a fearless, open-hearted willingness to admit that we don't know it all, and that we are ready to go where God might take us. Do we face an uncertain future? Great, because we trust that God is with us, and we know that certainty is an illusion anyway. Will we have to abandon some things we cherish? Well, we can handle that, because we know that renewal means discovering that some things don't give life like they once did. Will we land in unfamiliar territory? Well, that's the best kind, because that's the only place where we grow.

Yet we must remain vigilant, because the temptations back to conformity are pretty much everywhere. Frank Crouch writes,

In the U.S., we live in a culture that inundates us with advertising designed to keep us conformed to this world. The marketing/media industry spends billions of dollars annually to flood televisions, websites, billboards, email, regular mail. They intrude even onto the gas pump screen... They seek to define us essentially as consumers, individual economic units existing for the sake of larger market shares. In addition, each day our families, friends, organizations, religions, political parties, and society at large pressure us to fit in, to stay within the boundaries of tradition, custom, or practice that mark who we're "supposed" to be.¹

But what we buy and how we vote is just the surface. The true dangers of conformity lay deeper, where we let our hearts take on the shape of the things of this world rather than the mystery of God. We distort ourselves to fit in to boxes that are fearful, greedy, tribal, or just plain selfish. Where we feel no need to go deeper, to renew our minds, or even grow in faith. To conform is to wrap ourselves around a collective certainty, which is to warp ourselves around it. To conform to the world is a subtle act of violence against our own souls. Conformity to the world, in Paul's eyes, was a form of death, for it means anchoring our great spirits on lifeless things.

And yet, there is good news here! But before I get to Paul's good news, let me remind you the good news that the medical community has for us all: these big ol' brains of ours, the vessels for the minds that God has given us, are only done growing if that's what we want out of life. If you prefer to be convinced that you are fully formed, fully cooked, have it all figured out and are in need of no more upgrades, great, we're happy for you, we wish you the very best. But that doesn't seem to be the way that God designed us. Paul had that figured out, and saw that following Jesus meant a living engagement with God, a life of renewal which by its very nature meant that faith was lively, dynamic, and ever-new.

It's humbling to realize that we are not as fully formed as we thought we were. Yet that is where we must begin, for while certainty feels good for a while, it is a form of death, and we are all about life. To approach God we must have a beginner's mind, eternally open to what God wants to show us while comfortable with knowing that we *don't* know. The neural pathways of our brains may slow down after age 2, but new pathways of spirit and faith open to us every day.

Rather than wrapping our souls around the lifeless ways of the world – which in Paul's day, as in ours, is so often the path of least resistance – Paul envisions discernment and faith as a lively, adventurous engagement with God. Renewal isn't something we do every few years, or just when things were getting a bit stale. Renewal is our everyday orientation, a wide-awake openness to where God is going to take us today. It means trusting that God is always working in us and through us, and that renewing our minds and our hearts is how we continue to listen.

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. To conform to the world is to give up our great freedom, and to choose to limit something that was never meant to be domesticated. The life of renewal is more courageous than that, it is wild and adventurous, it is at peace with not having it all figured out.

Where there is space for the Holy Spirit to move, there is life for us as well.

Homily for August 27, The Rev. Bernard. Owens, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina, the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16

ⁱ Crouch, Frank L.

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