

“TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF OUR MINDS”

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

In Chicago in the year 1963, at a conference on racism on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, a keynote speaker began his speech on racism with this opening line: “The issue, the only *issue*, at this conference is baptism.” This created quite a stir in the audience, as many rose in protest, for he was speaking to an interfaith gathering of Civil Rights advocates including many atheists. His name was William Stringfellow, a prominent theologian and lawyer, and one of America’s greatest prophets. He told the truth: “The issue, the only *issue*, at this conference is baptism.”

What did Stringfellow mean by his opening statement, that the only issue at a racism conference was baptism? Why did he not say the only issue was Jim Crow segregation, or non-violence, or some other creative, cooperative endeavor? Because Stringfellow meant to show that baptism is not a mere initiation rite, an ancient leftover ritual we do to join a club where we learn how to be nice to one another. Stringfellow knew that baptism is not merely a symbolic practice, but a bodily encounter with the presence of God. Even more, Stringfellow meant to teach us that baptism is the central issue in matters of race because baptism is the only practice powerful enough to empty racism of its power. Baptism makes us forever part of the Body of Christ, so that no matter the color of our skin, or any other distinguishing mark, we are individually members of one another.

As our nation continues turning on this widening gyre of race, and as we begin our ascent to the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation this October, I believe it’s fitting for us to go all the way back to the roots of Christian theology, and take stock of how our faith enables us to navigate one of the most difficult subjects of all: racism. Of course, this subject is as wide and as deep as the Atlantic Ocean. So, to be specific, I am speaking today on how our passage from Paul’s Letter to the Romans illuminates the relationship between baptism and race.

It all turns on a clever rhetorical sentence Paul gives us: “Do not be *conformed* to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds...” (12:2). If you’ve grown up in church you’ve likely memorized this verse before. If you’re new to church, you can still enjoy its rhetorical savvy. But in a rare instance that nerds like me enjoy, this phrase also rhymes in the original language. And even more, the Greek words sound like English words with which we’re familiar. Here it is in the original language: “Do not be *schematized* by the world, but be *metamorphosized* by the renewing of your minds...” I practiced that one. *Metamorphosized*. It’s not a word you’ll find in Webster’s, but there’s nothing to prevent us from adding it to our congregational lexicon. Don’t be *schematized*, but be...*metamorphosized*.

One of the greatest hoodwinking schemes in history is the scheme that says whiteness is the supreme version of human being. The scheme works like this: through our culture, our social structures, our language, our habits, and even in our theology, we are all taught that the basic, standard human being is a white person. Not unlike the way a paint can is mixed at a paint

store. You've watched them open up the can before. The base color is white. If there is to be something other than white, they must add pigments and dyes and mix it all together. But the base color is always white. And that is what we've been taught for centuries, so much so that it seeps into our intellectual faculties like a toxic chemical, altering the DNA of our brain cells. The basic human being is a white person, we've come to believe, and any standard of beauty or intelligence or cultural frame must seek to achieve this goal.

The comedian, Louis C.K., tells of how he once read a newspaper that said, "80 percent of the people in New York are minorities." He asked, should we "call them minorities when they get to be 80 percent of the population? That's a very white attitude, don't you think? I mean, you could take a white guy to Africa and he'd be like, 'Look at all the minorities around here! I'm the only majority!'"

This is the power of whiteness. And this is one of the real schemes, the real enemies, we're facing. Not enemies of flesh and blood. But the scheme itself, is what we're battling. This is why Paul, again in the context of baptism, speaks of maturing into the Body of Christ, so that we'll no longer be "children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness and deceitful scheming."

The scheme is so subtle, it even shows up in boxes of crayons. I remember coloring with a set of Crayola crayons. And when I'd want to color in my own face, there was in the box a special color just for me called "flesh." And this flesh color was a kind of light beige almost peach color. This is part of the scheme, that the darker colors in the box were not called "flesh." As if the only color flesh could be is the crayon color, "flesh."

This is how the scheme works. It sneaks in, by crafty and deceitful scheming. Well, but there's good news...there's such good news. The scheme, as it turns out, dissolves in water—specifically, the waters of baptism—because we, as people, made of dust, step into the water. And the dust becomes—what? —wet clay again, made pliable, so that we can metamorphosize in the hands of our Creator, our Potter. God pushes the divine thumbprint all the way down into the gray matter of our brain and reshapes it, every twist and turn, down to the depths, and reworks the scheme, works it out, and changes us all the way down in mind and heart, all the way down inside.

He grafts us into the body of Christ, so that our body is one with Christ. And it is revealed to us that this new standard of flesh is this divine standard—Son of Man, and Son of God. As we are attached to Him, that's where we get our power, our grace, and our mercy.

This is why I say to the newly baptized, the language that Paul gives us from Romans, that we are made able to walk in newness of life from these baptismal waters. I borrow also from II Corinthians 5, that says we no longer see one another from a human point of view, for we are "*new creation*." Everything old has passed away and everything has become new, and we are able to walk in newness of life. This newness of life involves a breaking down, a dissolution of the schematizing. And it makes a mind pliable for transformation, so that, growing up in the body of Christ, we also take on the mind of Christ.

I want this message to give you hope. As we look across the landscape of our age, and survey the challenges and the risks, and, sometimes, the dangers that lie ahead, I want you to step up and stand alongside William Stringfellow with conviction, with the power of your baptismal identity, and look out over all the chaos, and know in your heart the good news, that there is only one issue, when it comes to the matter of race: baptism...*your* baptism. You have not been conformed to this world, but you have been transformed. You have not been schematized. You have been metamorphosized, made part of Christ's own body, His flesh, and His blood, for all eternity. Thanks be to God.

**For context, this sermon was preached following the baptism of three new members, and immediately preceding the service of communion.*