

## “New Beginnings”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park on August 21, 2011

Texts: Exodus 1:8-21, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

New beginnings! What a blessings that we can begin anew each year! Students can leave behind whatever struggling grades or relationships they may have had last year and begin anew. They will now have new books, new classmates, and new teachers. Some of them even have new backpacks, which they will fill with new life! I am not exactly a student. But, as the weather gets cooler and back to school season draws close, I, too, think of new beginnings. I think of the things I leave behind. I think of the things I am about to embrace. What a wonderful and meaningful season!

It is in such a time as this that we hear Paul’s words: *“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.”* (Rm 12:2)

Discerning the will of God, discerning what is good, perfect, and pleasing to God – for many of us, this is the quest of our lives, is it not? This is especially true when we contemplate new beginnings, particularly when we are about to embark on a journey toward a new season in our lives. We want to know what God has in store for us. We want to know God’s will for our lives. We want to know. But, how?

Discernment is hard work. Its terrain can often become murky or even slippery. We are not unaware that the pages of history are strewn with false prophets, who were so sure they knew God’s will. It was not part of today’s reading, but just a few verses before our passage begins, Paul exclaimed, *“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways!”*

Does Paul know what he is saying? First, he tells us that God’s will is beyond us, that we will never figure it out. Then, he admonishes that we should discern what is the good and perfect will of God. Well, I don’t blame you if you are a little confused. Yet, at the same time, I do not think that Paul does not know what he is saying.

To better understand the flow of thought, I think we’d better pay attention to the connectors between these two seemingly conflicting statements. The first verse of our Epistle lesson reads: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God...”*

Did you hear it? The connecting word is not “but” or “however” but “therefore.” *“I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God,”* he says. He is not saying that we should still try even if we will never figure it out, and that we are doomed to failure. Rather, it is “because” God’s will is beyond us that we should not be conformed to this world. It is because of the deep, deep knowledge and wisdom of God that we are to renew our minds, so that we may discern God’s will. And we do this, not on our own, not by our wits, but by the pure *“mercies of God.”* *“I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God,”* he says.

I think that one of the vital elements in spiritual formation is the willingness to acknowledge who we truly are -- how finite, limited, ignorant, rebellious, fearful, and prideful we are. I am not sure how much of it is due to our nature and how much due to our nurture or social conditioning, but our minds and hearts are full of confusing and conflicting desires and ideas. They rule us from both within and around us.

In our Epistle lesson today, Paul urges us not to let these confusing and conflicting messages squeeze us into their own mold. *“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,”* he says. By the mercies of God, do not let the appetites and compulsions of the world rule you; by the mercies of God, break the hold of improper engagements; by the mercies of God, renew your minds; by the mercies of God, let the Spirit creatively use your life in the service of God’s good and perfect purpose; by the mercies of God, offer your body and your life up to God as a living sacrifice!

In our Old Testament lesson, we have a charming story of ordinary people who did just that. They were Hebrew midwives living in Egypt, generations after Joseph’s time. Joseph, a Hebrew who saved Egypt from the drought, had been long forgotten. The Israelites, who had become numerous, were now perceived as a risk, or a threat, to the Egyptians homeland security. So, the Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill all baby boys when delivering Hebrew women. Midwives against the king. Imagine yourselves in the midwives’ shoes. What would you have done? To whose voice would you have listened – the Pharaoh’s or the small, still voice from the inside questioning and resisting the Pharaoh’s order? I presume that at stake were the midwives’ own lives, not only those of the Hebrew baby boys.

Yet, two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, chose not to conform to the Pharaoh’s order. They chose not to listen to the voice of the world. How? Why? They had far too much respect for God. They feared God. They honored God. Their hearts and minds were engaged by the life-giving Spirit of God. Their souls were wide open and alert to God’s good and perfect will in the world. Take the baby boys’ lives? No way! They let all Hebrew babies live, boy or girl! No doubt God was pleased with the midwives. God gave them families of their own, and the Hebrew people continued to increase in number – a very strong people! Praise God!

Let us ask ourselves a question here. What are the voices we are hearing now? What are the voices that claim our allegiance and loyalty at this moment, in this season of new beginnings? How is the life-giving God calling us to a renewed and transformed existence, as individuals, as well as as a community?

In our Gospel lesson, we hear Simon Peter confessing Jesus as Christ, the Messiah, God’s anointed one. Upon this profession of faith, Jesus gives him a new name and a new life. Simon became Peter, the Rock, the foundation of the Church.

Are we willing to begin a new season with same confession? Are we willing to build our lives, our every day, ordinary lives, upon Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Lord? Are we willing to take our eating, sleeping, shopping, going to work or to school, working out, and walking around lives, and place them before God as an offering?

It is OK if we have been struggling with certain aspects or areas of our lives. By the mercies of God, we can begin anew. Just like students in this back-to-school season, we can leave behind whatever struggles we may have had in the past, we can begin anew. By the mercies of God, we can renew our minds. By the mercies of God, we can change our hearts. By the mercies of God, we can engage God’s good and perfect purpose in deeper and more meaningful ways. By the mercies of God, we can begin anew! Thanks be to God!