March 15, 2015
TEXT: Romans 12:1–3
TITLE: Saving Salvation: What Kind of World?

You stand and look out the window and ask yourself, "What kind of world do I live in?" Is it a good place or a bad place? Remembering John Calvin's prayer, is it a world of total depravity in which we are incapable of any good, transgressing God's holy commandments without end or ceasing? Or remembering Dr. Pangloss, Candide's optimistic philosopher, do we believe that this is the best of all possible worlds? We like to believe the latter; we too often experience the world as the former. So which is it?

To answer that question, you move from the window and now look in a mirror. How we experience the world is shaped by how we experience people. So what kind of people live in the world? Are human beings marred by sin and total depravity, or are we noble creatures, the best of all possible beings? Again, we like to believe the latter, but too often, like Pogo once said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." In the Presbyterian scale of human virtue, which weighs human nobility and human sinfulness, I'm afraid our tradition has always insisted the balance tips toward sinfulness. Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to two presidents and someone who helped coax the Cold War to an end, was never a man prone to triumphalism. He believed that in foreign policy, every success is just the start of the next crisis. When asked why he held that view, Scowcroft replied, "We're humans. Given a chance to screw up, we will."[1]

My seminary theology professor, Daniel Migliore, in one of his books said human beings are a mystery: "We are rational and irrational, civilized and savage, capable of deep friendship and murderous hostility...We are Rembrandt and Hitler, Mozart and Stalin, Antigone and Lady Macbeth...the pinnacle of creation and its greatest danger."[2] How then should we think of ourselves? Well, if we are atheists, then we are simply the chance byproduct of a convoluted process of evolution. In the words of Macbeth, life's a poor "tale told by idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." If we believe in God, though, we argue that we are not bit players tossed into a play without a script but rather actors created and commissioned to fill important roles in God's drama of salvation-history.

Migliore stresses that, as it says in the book of Genesis, we are created in the image of God. We look in the mirror and despite everything else we see, we possess that fundamental feature—the *imago Dei*, image of God. But where does it reside? It doesn't seem logical to believe that the Eternal Creator physically looks like us, despite how Michelangelo painted God on the Sistine Chapel. Maybe the image of God resides in our capacity to reason—that our minds' intelligence reflects a deep connection with the divine reason by which the world was created. Maybe it is seen in the fact that we have been given dominion over the earth, just as God has power and dominion over the universe. Maybe it is related to our ability to create things on our own—that our freedom and

intelligence and power combine to make us “little c” creators acting in the image of God, the “big C” Creator. The problem with this is that for all our reason and power and creative freedom, as Scowcroft said, “given the chance to screw up, we will.”

Migliore and other theologians suggest that being created in the image of God means this: We live in relationship, just as God lives in relationship.[3] The triune God exists in relationship—God as Father, Son, Holy Spirit; God as Creator in relationship with us and this world. In the same way, we are the image of God as we live in relationship with the world, one another, and with God. So what kind of world do we live in? It is a God-blessed world in which purpose and meaning come through our relationships.

Let’s put this another way: We are not the center of the universe. We are not islands or loners. We live in dialogue. We exist to respond to and interact with God and one another. Early American theologian Jonathan Edwards said, “*God has so made the world of mankind that it [is] natural and necessary that we should be concerned one with another, and linked together in society.”*[4] So the answers to our existential questions are found neither in Calvin’s prayer of confession (which is too focused on individual sin) or Pangloss’ Pollyanna belief in this being the “best of all possible worlds.” We must move away from both the mirror and the window and step out into the world God has made and Christ has redeemed, and look one another in the eyes. Through relationships with one another and with God in Christ, we discover who we are.

According to the apostle Paul, to do this is a three-part process. <u>First</u>, we start with the opening verse from Romans 12 which says, *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.* Another word for living sacrifice is a living “offering.” We live as something consecrated, set apart, wholly dedicated to the will and work of God. We present ourselves—we step out—we encounter the world face to face, trusting the mercy of God. This happens in our home life, our work life, our economic, civic and political life. We don’t hide from the world; rather we are to live as people of faith—living sacrifices, living offerings.

<u>Second</u>, as Presbyterians we remember that the scales of humanity are never perfectly in balance and that they tip toward the side of sinfulness more than the side of perfection. Therefore we step into the world carrying what is called a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” We know that all that glitters is not gold. We know that too often we have met the enemy and he is us. As Paul wrote, *I say to everyone not to think of yourself more highly than you ought, but to think with sober judgment.*

There are two sides to every question, and sadly in this world the popular answer is rarely the faithful answer. Let’s look at an example of this. In recent years, America’s acts of war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen have relied on

new technology involving drones. Sadly, both the Bush and Obama administrations have touted the use of these devices. Supporters point out that drones are a far better option than sending hundreds of troops into dangerous, foreign cities; they are less costly than battalions of Marines; they can work with surgical accuracy; and they do not put American soldiers directly at risk. Flying weapons achieving military goals with no direct American casualties—what's not to like? But as ethicist and ELPC member Ron Stone has pointed out, drones as lethal weapons of war are seriously flawed. A Presbyterian chaplain serving in the Middle East reported how soldiers were concerned they were killing people in a way that lacked integrity, that it was not a "fair fight." Drones are relatively slow-flying devices, so they don't work against enemies that have adequate air forces or defenses against aerial attack. They are designed to defeat simple people, basically peasant people in poor lands. And since the people can't fight back, the soldiers felt more like executioners than combatants. Second, even surgical strikes go bad. A March 2011 attack on a bus depot killed the three Taliban targeted, but it also wiped out a council of 40 tribal elders and nearby children. The appropriately named "hellfire missiles" incinerated the victims beyond recognition.[5] Because of drones, normal social life in poor regions gets suspended because people fear to gather lest unseen weapons are unleashed against them. For these people, how can faceless assaults with drones ever be seen as coming from well-meaning American allies?

This is precisely where Paul's third admonition comes into play: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good, acceptable and perfect.* Stanley Hauerwas always says, "The world cannot know it is the world without the church being an alternative to the world and its solutions." We exist in relationship to God and to one another. But in that relationship, we are to be the church of Jesus Christ - presenting ourselves as living sacrifices; not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought; not conforming ourselves to the ways of the world. It is only then that we can point out the ways that the scales of justice are out of balance—the truth that faceless violence can never evoke peace—the gospel message that only by living justly, compassionately, and walking humbly with our God can we fully become human beings.

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed. It doesn't say transform yourself. It doesn't say to trust in your own intelligence or your own power. We are to <u>be</u> transformed by God's grace, God's love and hope – that's something given to us as a gift each and every day we are alive. Garrison Keillor tells a story of attending a 13-year old niece's confirmation party, and written in the cake's icing was this bible verse: *Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed.* The piece of cake they gave him said "Con but for" but he remembered the rest of the verse as he ate his slice.[6] We offer that wish for a 13-year old; we should hold onto that same wisdom for ourselves.

We live in an imperfect world, yet a blessed world, where we come to know ourselves fully through transforming relationships with God and one another. In this knowledge is our strength and our salvation. Thanks be to God.

---

[1] Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, book review of The Strategist by Bartholomew Sparrow; NY Times Book Review, March 8, 2015, p. 24.
[2] Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 1991, p. 120.
[3] Ibid., p. 122.
[4] Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Church Practices for a Worldly Spirituality," Always Being Reformed, 2008, 106-7.
[5] Ron Stone, "Drones and Christian Morality," Applied Christian Ethics, ed. Matthew L. Weaver, 2014, pp. 267-8.
[6] Garrison Keillor, The Keillor Reader, 2014, p. 90.