

“Confirming, not Conforming”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

August 23, 2020 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – August 23, 2020

We are God’s People #472 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1, 2, 4

(words adapted for consistency with the Book of Praise; third verse added from B of P)

We are God's people the chosen of the Lord
Born of the Spirit, established by the Word
Our cornerstone is Christ alone and strong in Him we stand
O let us live transparently
And walk heart to heart and hand in hand

We are God’s loved one, the bride of Christ our Lord
For we have known it, the love of God outpoured
Now let us learn how to return the gift of love once given
O let us share each joy and care
And live with a zeal that pleases heaven

We are a temple the Spirit's dwelling place
Formed in great weakness a cup to hold God's grace
Alone, we die, for on its own each ember loses fire
Yet joined in one the flame burns on
To give warmth and light and to inspire
Bryan Jeffery Leech | Fred Bock | Johannes Brahms
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How Clear is our Vocation, Lord #649 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1 & 4

How clear is our vocation Lord
When once we heed your call
To live according to Your Word
And daily learn, refreshed, restored
That You are Lord of all
And will not let us fall

In what You give us Lord to do
Together or alone
In old routines and ventures new
May we not cease to look to You
The cross You hung upon
All You endeavoured done
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I, the Lord of Sea and Sky #592 in the Book of Praise – All verses

I, the Lord of sea and sky
I have heard my people cry
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save
I who made the stars of night
I will make their darkness bright
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go, Lord, if you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart

I, the Lord of snow and rain
I have borne my people's pain
I have wept for love of them
They turn away
I will break their hearts of stone
Give them hearts for love alone
I will speak my word to them
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go, Lord, if you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart

I, the Lord of wind and flame
I will tend the poor and lame
I will set a feast for them
My hand will save
Finest bread I will provide
Till their hearts be satisfied
I will give my life to them
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go, Lord, if you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart

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Scripture Texts: Psalm 138

*I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart;
before the “gods” I will sing your praise.*

*² I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name
for your unfailing love and your faithfulness,
for you have so exalted your solemn decree
that it surpasses your fame.*

*³ When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.*

*⁴ May all the kings of the earth praise you, Lord,
when they hear what you have decreed.*

*⁵ May they sing of the ways of the Lord,
for the glory of the Lord is great.*

*⁶ Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly;
though lofty, he sees them from afar.*

*⁷ Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life.*

*You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.*

*⁸ The Lord will vindicate me;
your love, Lord, endures forever—
do not abandon the works of your hands.*

Romans 12:1-8

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. You know, I always knew my mom was close to God, but when I read a scripture like this I realize just how close she was. In different words, she gave me this same instruction time after time. Her words sounded more like, “Just because your friends are doing it doesn’t mean you should. You make up your own mind.” I will never forget the first concert my friends and I all wanted to attend. We were in Grade 8 and the band The Romantics was playing in Sarnia. We were all so excited. I flew through the door after school and with great enthusiasm asked if I could go, not imagining there could be any answer other than a resounding yes! I was crushed when the answer was a resounding no. I couldn’t believe it. I asked my dad when he came home. He asked what mom had said and backed her up. Rats. So I came up with every young teen’s reason that makes perfect sense... “But *everyone* is going!” Had I given that even a heartbeat of thought I would have realized that was the last statement I should have been making. But thirteen year old girls don’t think of such things. They just don’t want to be left out. I didn’t want to be left out. I was asked who *everyone* was. When I rattled off a few names, mom looked at me with that look that only a mother can give and said that was exactly the group I should not be going to concerts with. They were starting to head in a rather troubling direction and there was no way mom wanted me in crazy-hyper concert setting with them. It was the most unfair thing I had ever heard!

When I think about those times in my life I’ve had to make a decision whether to do or not do something because it may not be the best choice, I realize I have subconsciously heard that instruction in my mind as I’ve wrestled with whatever I’m deciding. *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* But that’s not where the verse stops. The apostle goes on to say, *Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.* It’s not a simple “What Would Jesus Do” thing, but rather, “what would God have me do here? What decision will honour what God wants for my life?” That’s why we must pray without ceasing, so that we stay connected with God and can discern the direction in which we are to go, to the best of our ability to do that.

Offering ourselves as living sacrifices means the whole of our lives is worship. If we think of everything we do and say as an act of worship, it changes what we do and say and how we do and say it! We always want to offer something appropriate to God, so our lives should reflect that desire. We mess up, sure. It’s called sin. But we are assured of forgiveness we realize we’ve messed up and offer that confession to God with sincerity. That’s called repentance. God’s mercy through Christ is endless, which is good news, because so is our capacity to mess up.

It’s awfully tempting to conform to the patterns of this world. Even when the pattern keeps shifting, it is far easier to shift with it than to stay on God’s path. As churches plan to re-open sanctuaries for community worship, it is tempting to come up with all kinds of catchy ways

to grab people's attention, with the hope it will revive a passion for the church. But catchy ways to worship are not always pleasing to God. Some are. Some aren't. Yes, we will have to be rather creative in planning and implementing worship services. With no congregational singing, we will have to do some work to provide meaningful praise. We will have to make fuller use of the technology in the sanctuary to invite people into the presence of God. We will have to be intentional about trying new things because they serve a real purpose, not simply because they are new. Just as tradition is only worth keeping if it still serves a meaningful, worshipful purpose, new forms of worship are only worth trying if they serve a meaningful, worshipful purpose. It will be a balancing act for sure, but with the grace and wisdom of God to guide us, we will do all we can to discern the right way for our worshipping community. When we come together for worship, we pray we will be changed by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds. We also pray that our worship will be pleasing to God, connect us more deeply to our Creator who loves us so dearly, and teach us how to follow more faithfully. It ought to renew our minds, as Paul says, and aid in transforming us, forming us. Biblical preaching and worship should build a Godly worldview within God's people, not just lay down a set of rights and wrongs, rules and regulations to follow. The Bible is not a policy and procedure manual. It is a living document that transforms those who read with the wisdom of the Spirit to guide them.

I read a rather fascinating illustration about this. "Modern airliners are guided by their onboard computers. Pilots are told where they are and where they are to go by those computers. But airports still have runway lights. Pilots check the accuracy of the computer by visually watching those lights. So also the Christian. We are guided by our minds, in the process of being renewed so that they perfectly reflect God's will. But because that process will never be complete in this life, we still need the external guidance of God's commands."¹

God has given us our own minds with which to think, make decisions, and understand the world and God's work in it. We are not puppets for a controlling puppet-master. We are children, loved by a gracious heavenly Father, allowed to make our mistakes as we grow and mature into the people God intends for us to be. Our minds are like onboard computers. They tell us where we are and where we are to go. But they cannot do that well without God keeping us on the right runway. We must test the thoughts of our minds within the guidance of God's Word and Spirit, to discern if our minds are guiding us in the right direction. Sometimes, computers glitch. God never does.

Confirming God's way rather than conforming to the patterns of the world does not mean we are to be tunnel-visioned, only seeing things one way with no room for interpretation, no room for discussion.

There was a time when the church thought an organ was the instrument of the devil.

There was a time when only the priest had access to the Word.

There was a time when women were not permitted to be ordained as Elders or Ministers, and children were not allowed at the Lord's Table.

¹ Moo, Douglas J. The NIV Applications Commentary: Romans. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, Pg 400.

I'm sure glad there is room for people to change their minds, come to new understandings and to listen to the interpretation of the Word. Not all interpretations are led by the Spirit. Human nature will lead us to interpret things as we want, not necessarily as God intends. We aren't perfect. We don't always get it right. But God invites us to pray for discernment and direction when our desire is for everything we say and do to be an act of worship. God leaves room for us to get it wrong, and guides us to get it right.

More than 35 years later, with kids of my own, I can now see my mom was right not to let me go to that concert. Would she ever love to hear me say that! She knew better than I did how to see what was going on, where it was headed, and that I should not go. She knew better than I did how to assess a situation and discern the right path. It came with life experience, and a desire to stay on the right runway. In her denial of what I wanted, she kept me on the right runway too. How much more does our heavenly Father guide us in our life's decisions, keeping us on the right path, God's path, and helping us to confirm our trust in him, not conform to the path of this world. Sometimes that path coincides with what God desire for us; sometimes it doesn't. Regardless, God shows us the way to choose through the guidance of the Spirit and the Word. From the beginning, God's people have had to discern God's way. Christ came and made it abundantly clear that God's way may not be the easiest, but it is the best. The risen Christ sent his Spirit to keep leading and guiding us. No matter how our understanding and interpretation may be formed and re-formed as we mature in our faith, one thing remains: God's way is always the right runway, and we have all the guidance we need to stay on that path through the wisdom and discernment we are given through the Holy Spirit and the Word. Amen.