

Fitting In

As I have been watching the national scene unfold the past couple of weeks, it occurred to me that human behavior is one of the greatest mysteries of life.

In almost all other facets of existence, our knowledge has been increasing exponentially over the years. We can land humans on the moon and bring them home safely. We can cram billions of bits of information onto a microscopic chip. We can cure a host of illnesses that would have killed us only a few decades ago. We can entertain ourselves in ways we never dreamed of. We have instant access to almost everyone in the world.

And yet when it comes to the art of getting along with others, we don't seem to be making much progress. It's a valid question to ask: do we know any more about living with our neighbors than prehistoric cavepeople?

The frustrating thing is that we know we are capable of doing so much better. We have all experienced the uplifting power of love. Every day we hear inspirational stories of people doing amazing, selfless things and we encounter some of those ourselves.

Recently, at the same time that public displays of hatred and bigotry were degrading the nation, I witnessed the exact opposite at a local hospital. A teenage girl with a unique gift of drawing together complete strangers suffered what proved to be fatal injuries in a car accident. While she was in Critical Care, more than 100 people of many races, backgrounds, and beliefs showed up at the hospital to show their love for her and their care and concern for the family.

Every week in churches throughout the nation, we are ushered into a higher level of spiritual presence; there we are encouraged to follow the better angels of our natures.

We know how to live in peace and harmony with those around us. The formula is really simple: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.* That's really all there is to it. And when we follow that formula we can do incredibly wonderful things.

So what exactly is the problem? Why can't we come close to mastering this simple directive? How is it that that hatred and violence keep coming out of the shadows and bursting into flame in our country and throughout the world?

How is it that we come to identify with Linus's bizarre conundrum: "I love humankind; it's people I can't stand?"

Those are enormous questions. Even if we could definitively answer them, would it make any difference? Knowing the answers could we be able to alter our behavior enough to produce a peaceful, just, and prosperous creation?

I actually think the answer to that is "Yes." But it will take more than a convincing intellectual argument. It will take more even than a desire to do the right thing. It will take something that the Apostle Paul described in Romans 12:2: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by God.*

The first part of that can also be translated, *do not be conformed to this age.* The kingdom of God will never truly be established as long as we are conformed to this world, and to the times in which we live.

That is not to say that the world God created for us is inherently evil; that would make no sense. Creation exists because God did not find much joy in living alone with unlimited power and knowledge. God found joy in sharing the wonderful gifts of creation in community with others.

We were created in God's image so that we, too, could experience the joy of living in community—with God and with others. The problem is, unless you are like God--a completely loving, giving person--living in community is not easy. Those who are not completely loving and giving are highly susceptible to bad influences.

That means all of us. If we fail to recognize that, we doom ourselves to become, as Paul put it, "slaves" to these community-destroying influences.

It is obvious from human history, and our inability over the course of centuries right up to the present to get ourselves free from conforming to hatred, bigotry, fear, and violence, that slavery is a very accurate metaphor.

Conforming means trying to fit in. Our desire to fit in with others is not automatically harmful to living in community with others. In fact, this desire to conform is necessary to create community. It provides us with shared values, customs, rites, etiquette, and a shared sense of purpose in our lives.

The desire to conform is what holds us accountable to maintaining community standards of right and wrong. It pulls us back when we start to wander off the path of right living.

But what happens when the *community* starts to wander off that path? When it starts to lose sight of its purpose, its morality, its sense of justice? When it loses touch with the great commandment to love God and our neighbor?

When the community starts to wander from those things, then the urge to conform becomes not a blessing but a curse. The urge to fit in pressures us to abandon what we know is right. To abandon our commitment to follow Jesus, and to love God and the neighbor.

We get lulled into thinking that, by conforming to the prevailing norms, we are preserving peace in the community. But whenever we abandon Jesus' great commandment, we sow the seeds of ruin for ourselves and our community.

Conforming to societal pressure can lead us down many dangerous and destructive paths. In Philippians, Paul encourages us as Christians to shun that path and to be positive influences on a society that often loses its way.

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

That is the way to live in peaceful community.

When the community starts straying from this path, our desire to fit in pushes us to quietly abandon the fight for what we know is right, especially when we feel outnumbered. Instead of being a positive influence that could encourage others to reach for the stars of love, justice, beauty, and communion with God, we abandon those convictions for fear of not fitting in.

The result is a gradual but steady cheapening and degrading of the community and ourselves.

One of the inventors of the television envisioned his invention as a way of lifting society up, of providing access to the best and most honorable forms of art, music, literature, education, news commentary, and human endeavor.

Later in life, he refused to watch TV and he came to deeply regret his role in bringing about this invention. His disillusionment came about from how television was conformed to this world.

Instead of focusing on being a positive force in the community, television programming chased after whatever could make a buck. When you do that, you appeal to the least common denominator and everyone sinks to that level.

In a relatively brief time, he noted, society became conformed to a medium that catered to the basest instinct in people. While there continue to be individuals who strive against this pressure to conform, who strive to produce something of beauty and of positive influence on society, there have never been enough to make television the positive force its inventor envisioned it to be.

We've seen the same thing repeated with the internet, in business practice, politics, and countless other areas of society. Yes, there are good things being done out there, and kudos to those who have the courage to do it. But imagine what it could be if not for the relentless drive for conformity that cheapens and degrades our world.

Here's one example of how that race to the bottom works. Nothing sells better in the movie industry than **vengeance**: where some one or people is abused by another but comes back to exact a delicious, satisfying, violent revenge. Think of all the story lines you have seen with that plot. Revenge sells so much better than those things Paul talks about.

Hardly anyone stops to think that vengeance is one of the basest instincts of human beings. It is an evil concept diametrically opposed to the teachings of Jesus. It is a celebration of hatred and violence masquerading as justice.

When we conform to the world in celebrating hatred and violence, is it any wonder we cannot live in community with our neighbors? Is it any wonder why there is so much unrest hatred in our land, and in our world?

This phenomenon is not new to our day and age. The Old Testament prophets constantly railed against conformity with the eroding values of the world. Time and time again, the people had been called by God into a beautiful, peaceful relationship with creation.

They knew what was right about caring for the poor and powerless, about welcoming the stranger, about forgiveness, loving God, and serving others. But they always seemed to give in to pressures to ignore that.

Time and again, the group began to slide off the rails—gradually abandoning God’s pleadings for justice and love to serve the lowest common denominators among them. And instead of fighting for what was right, the people just went along with the trend of what was happening.

Time and again, nonconformist prophets fought against the current of society and called on the people to buck these destructive trends. To get back to loving God and the neighbor. Doing so took courage. No one likes to be seen as the outdated stick-in-the-mud. Fighting the swift current of popular trends always takes courage.

We see that in our own times. We know what is right regarding racism and bigotry, about caring for the poor and powerless, about forgiveness, about loving God, welcoming the stranger and serving others.

When we see our neighbors start to slide off the rails on some of that stuff, as happens in all human communities from time to time, how do we react? Just let it ride? Rationalize that it isn’t really as bad as it seems? If that’s the way the wind is blowing, find a way to not only to accept it but embrace it? In fact, let it arouse the darker natures of our being.

That is precisely what Paul warns against. Do not conform to this world. When the community starts to go wrong, help it get back on track. Be a positive force for good.

This seems like a hopeless, naïve attitude. For all of human history, most people have been conforming to what goes on around them in society. The current of worldly way is simply too strong for most people to overcome.

That current is too strong for intellectual arguments or prodding or goading or haranguing people, or even appeals to our better natures to overcome.

But Paul believed that living in community was possible through the transforming power of Jesus. The people we see who demonstrate the love and the human spirit that awe and inspire us are seldom brought to that point by analyzing the situation and by rationally coming to the conclusion that society is heading in the wrong direction.

They do what they do because they are transformed. God is able to reach into their hearts and change them from timid, wanting-to-fit-in folks, into people who are on fire for loving God and the neighbor. Their lives are changed so that what they live for is following the path shown them by Jesus.

So focused are they on loving God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and their neighbors as themselves, that the currents of popular opinion no longer deter them from expressing that love.

Will we ever manage to live in community without conforming to the hatred and violence, fear and suspicion, arrogance and selfishness that rips us apart? After all this time, it seems highly unlikely we're going to learn how to do this. We're not likely to persuade or be persuaded to do this.

We do it only when we open our hearts so that God can enter into our lives and change us into new people. People who, driven by the spirit of God, are set free from the pressure to fit in with the prevailing weakness of the world that erodes our will to love God and our neighbor.

People who, transformed into new beings by the power of our creator, can do the seemingly impossible—join with a group of people of different beliefs, backgrounds, races, nationalities, and abilities, and work together as neighbors for the common good.

Hearts are often touched, and changed, by tragedy. So often it seems that deep tragedy is the *only* thing that can get us to open our hearts and live in the peace and unity and confidence that God created us to live.

If only we could learn. If only we could open our hearts without being driven there by tragedy and suffering and pain. If only we would realize that opening our hearts to the power of God's transforming love will free us from the slide to the basest instincts of our nature.

When that happens, and only then, will we be free to live as God intended us to live.

Pray for that day to happen and soon. And pray that we as individuals, as the church, and as a nation, open ourselves to the transforming power of God that will allow us to fill our minds with *“whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, whatever is excellent and worthy of praise.*

Seeking that will give us a chance to finally crawl out of the muck, soar to the stars on the wings of love, and enjoy the peace that passes all understanding.