

Proper 22 A  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
St. Paul's Wilmington NC  
The Rev. Adam Pierce

### What forms us?

Change is a slow process. But it's a simple process really. It takes only two things from us, they are time and attention. If we give the process of change those two things of ourselves then with time, we will be changed. Now the problem though is that very often we give our time and energy to wrong processes of change; to things that may be more harmful than good, and the worst part is that we don't even realize we're doing it.

There is a new documentary out on Netflix called the Social Dilemma. It raises questions about the role and function of social media in our lives. Social media, in and of itself is meant to connect us to other people. We are as created, as children of God wired for human connection, literally. Good human interaction releases dopamine in our brains and makes us feel good, makes us happy, gives us confidence and self-esteem. The opposite is also true of course.

The problem though is that social media has been such a part of our lives since as early as 2005 that we can't imagine life without it. The Church even grapples with what to do with it, we have selfie Sundays and all youth ministers are told that if you want to engage with kids get on Instagram. But are we asking the right questions about what this is actually doing to us?

We become addicted to using social media for the positive feedback we receive from the engagement and all of that is intentional. Again, how we're wired as humans. The sinister side to this though is the harmful change this media plays in our lives. Look at any election year and see, especially this one, the vitriol that spews from our keyboards or that we share on our pages, or worse, the dis-information. All of this is shaping us in ways we may not even be aware of fully. There is one troubling demographic though. Children who are my niece's ages, they are pre-teens and teens, they have grown up with this technology. They're behavior has changed: they are going on less dates and less parties (great news for dads like me) they're much less interested in driving than previous generations because their social life is all on their phones. And even more troubling still, since 2010 suicide rates among this demographic have nearly tripled. This is not good news. Self-esteem and self-worth are all being valued through social media. It's not just a problem for this next generation; it's a problem for all of us.

The world as we know it through social media is shaping us to be impatient, angry, and people who respond in short bursts of anger. Does this sound like the way of life to us?

I admit, I've walked us down into this valley and I hope it's not too hard of a climb back up, but this is the reality we find ourselves living in. How many of us have had negative social media interactions that have influenced the way we see people in our lives? People in our church? People who support another political candidate than we do? I'd imagine all hands raised from those that use social media (Ray doesn't use social media, his kids think he's a nerd for it, but perhaps he's really wise)

The questions today aren't about how we get along with one another or how we engage with one another in healthy ways (good questions to ask, just not the fundamental one) the fundamental question is: What do we value in life. This is the question Paul asks of us today in Philippians

Paul in Philippians talks about the surpassing value of knowing Christ. For Paul, and for us that means allowing ourselves to be formed in Christ Jesus. All that Paul used to think was important, being the best Pharisee, being the most righteous according to the law, he now sees as garbage. In Jesus we see all we need for life. This is what the church is called to do in the world, become that new creation, become that body that is about God's reconciling, healing love.

Because of this The Church, at its best, is also an arena for change. It too is a slow process, but one that if we give time to it, if we value the time we have enough to give that time to church and our faith these practices too can work change in us over time. Faith does this through the love and knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the one in whose life we are baptized into. We participate in this act over time through our liturgy and our worship. By it we are being shaped and molded. Here we practice forgiveness with one another. We confess our sins together, extend the sign of peace to one another and together receive Jesus Christ's body broken for us together. It is here in this place together, that we are formed in Christ Jesus.

When we hurt someone by the things we say that is an opportunity to grow stronger into our identity as forgiven, It's an opportunity to seek the others forgiveness. What are the things we have done that have hurt others? How can we find opportunities to seek their forgiveness? How can we have the strength to forgive them when they apologize? I'm not sure entirely, but God's grace is a good place to start. All of this takes time, all of this takes energy, and we won't get it right every time, but thank God for God's abundant love of us.

The world will shape us and change us if we let it. Paul knew this. But life is not found in the world. Life is found in God revealed in the world through Jesus Christ. So do we value the things the world values? Riches; political power; success? Or do we value the life known in Christ? Love of neighbor, forgiveness, acceptance, making us fools in the world's eyes in order to gain life.

There is one final story I want to leave you with this morning. It is a story about the Church and how its practices shape us if we let them into the way of life Jesus has come to show us:

The story goes that a young man, an unpleasant type, falls in love with a saintly young woman. Knowing that she will not so much as look in his direction, he slips into the vault of the town cathedral, dons one of the masks of the saints used in the annual town festival, takes on the demeanor and behavior of a saint, and begins to woo her. Surely enough, over time, she begins to fall in love with him. As the relationship flowers and deepens, the young man's unsavory friends become envious of his success with the young woman and, one day, out of sheer spite, challenge him to take off the mask and reveal his true identity. Dejected, knowing that all is lost, he slowly removes the mask...only to reveal that his face has become the face of a saint.<sup>1</sup>

Friends, what masks do we spend more time wearing? I pray for myself and for all of us that we may value our saintly masks more than our earthly ones. Life depends on it. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> James W. Farwell, *The Liturgy Explained* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), 1.