Our Mindful Worship—Rom 12:1-8

St. Paul encourages us to give God our mindful worship. The word that gets translated in our reading for today as spiritual, in that curious phrase, “your spiritual worship” (12:1), is one of those peculiar Greek words that encompasses many aspects of our thinking, feeling, perceiving, and willing. “Spiritual,” then, doesn’t quite capture for us, doesn’t quite express to us, what St. Paul has in mind. Mindful seems closer to what he means. We’re to offer God mindful worship. What does that mean? Mindful means not only that our minds are engaged as we worship, but that we are mindful of what we are doing, that we’re paying attention, being thoughtful, careful, alert. The opposite of mindful is distracted, inattentive. We live so much of our lives distracted, inattentive. Anyone who works with machinery or tools knows the danger of being inattentive or distracted. Some of you have the scars to prove it!

How much more important, then, attentiveness, mindfulness, in our worship! In worship, as we worship, our health, welfare, our life, is truly at stake! Mindful worship is engaged worship. Some people worship in ways that engage the body: Pentecostals getting “slain in the Spirit,” or speaking in tongues, are worshiping with their bodies. When millions of Christians each Sunday kneel or cross themselves, or stand, or lift their arms in praise, or fold their hands or bow their heads, they worship with their bodies—their bodies are engaged in worship.

This is a good thing. St. Paul is also reminding us that we are embodied beings. We are who and what we are by virtue of having bodies, these sorts of bodies. God gives us such bodies for a purpose. Worship, holiness, God-pleasing lives, is that purpose.

Worship engages the body, but many Christians yearn for their hearts to be engaged, too. Worship and emotion naturally go together, especially when we reflect upon the magnitude of God, and of God’s love, and of Christ’s compassion and sacrifice. Emotion naturally enters into our worship as we realize both our immeasurable need and our great, gaping lack: our great need for God’s love, compassion, mercy, and grace, and our great lack of these in ourselves. As much as we may have and share love, we do not have it or share it to the extent that God has love and shares love. Our love tends to be circumscribed within fairly narrow circles, and we’re usually content with that, until we consider that God would have us love more broadly and more deeply.

It’s difficult to care about someone if you don’t have love for him or for her. If you don’t truly care, it’s difficult to have concern for their welfare and well-being, and so it’s also difficult to be concerned about the state of their soul. Many people seem to have far more concern, care, love, and compassion for animals and the natural world, the environment, than for their fellow human beings.

God does not call us to love abstractions—Nature, Humanity—but the concrete: actual people, actual places, our actual God, who has a Word for us.

Worship engages our bodies, and worship engages our emotions. But physical, emotional worship doesn’t quite challenge us, it doesn’t demand anything of us other than to sway and feel. If all you want is to sway and feel, well, you already have discovered that that’s not what worship here is about. Our aim, the aim of Reformed worship, is that mindful worship that St. Paul commends to us today in Romans. Mindful worship confronts us even as it comforts us; such worship challenges us and encourages us to be transformed. Mindful worship is what helps to keep us aware that there is a difference between being conformed to this world and being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Mindful worship transforms us.

For those for whom the swaying, feeling worship style is not at all appealing, there is, at the other end, the intellectual lecture style. I once heard a pastor in a Presbyterian church preach a sermon based on the Tao Te Ching, which as the name suggests, is a Chinese religious text, not Christian in any sense. That sermon was certainly novel, and for some it may even have been intellectually stimulating, but it had nothing to do with Jesus Christ and the Good News. It had everything to do with trying to stimulate rather than bore. That’s not much different from those who want to sway and feel,

which is stimulation of another sort. It is sad and avoidable to be bored in worship, and there are good ways to avoid boredom, and not so good ways to avoid boredom in worship.

For the feeling of intellectual stimulation, probably Unitarians are best. At one time, Unitarians really did believe in God, the God we come to know through Scripture, who invites us to come to know Him through Scripture. Over the past one hundred fifty years or so, though, Unitarian worship has lost more and more of its Biblical anchor. Unitarians today tend to be highly educated, thinking, intellectual people: teachers, doctors, engineers, scientists, professors. They live very much in the world of the mind, and their worship shows it, shows their great confidence in the power of reason and the human mind apart from Scripture, over Scripture.

St. Paul exhorts us to mindful worship, but mindful worship is not intellectual worship, which always, eventually, becomes worship of the intellect, just as emotional worship, eventually, becomes worship of the emotions, of feeling. People start out worshiping God, and all too often that worship ends up worshiping some human faculty. Predictably, the object of worship always eventually becomes us in some way or other. The tendency to idolatry runs deep. Emotional worship and intellectual worship get caught up in themselves. Only mindful worship, worship that keeps its attention fixed on God, God revealed to us, for us, in Jesus Christ, only mindful worship, consciously and conscientiously offered to God, keeps us open to God, keeps us pointed toward God, keeps our bodies attentive for God, our hearts attentive for God, our minds attentive for God. God made us as we are, built this way, with these capabilities, for a purpose. Worship is that purpose—holiness, lives and bodies honoring God.

God makes mindful worship possible for us, available to us. He offers this worship to us through calling us to transformation rather than conformity. Now, many of you lived through the fifties, and you have good memories and mixed memories about those years. You may also be aware that many historians now talk about that decade as the Decade of Conformity. If you remember the movie *Pleasantville*, then you have seen how the fifties are thought of today: repressive, physically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically. We think of the fifties that way largely because of the sixties, which are popularly thought of as the decade of nonconformity. We know it’s bad to be a conformist. Conformists have no individuality, no personality, no freedom, no liberty: sheep, lemmings, and so forth. The only ones who truly have liberty, freedom, personality, and individuality are the rebels, right? If there are any former flower children here today, you’re secretly nodding your heads in agreement.

The problem that St. Paul calls to our attention is that all this social, cultural talk of conformity and rebellion misses the point entirely.

Conformist and rebel are both caught in the web of this world, and both will perish here. We are not to be conformed to this world, to its warped obsession with the body, the flesh, with its onanistic playing with the emotions, with its lethal division of mind from body. We are not to be conformed to this world and the ways of this world. Many in the Church these days believe, quite genuinely and passionately, that the changes we see in society and the Church are signs of the Spirit at work, that very transformation about which St. Paul spoke to the Romans.

That’s not what I see. What I see is conformity, abject conformity to the thinking of the hour, the values of the hour. Tell me how the currents pushing along the PC(USA) are any different from a “Progressive” political agenda. As many pastors and concerned faithful have pointed out over the last several decades, those in power in the PC(USA) might as well be spokespersons for the Democratic Party. But don’t get me wrong! Any church that cleaves to the Republican agenda is caught in the same trap. God does not call us to be Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Libertarians, or anything but Christian, placing our faith in Jesus and trusting in him to help us to live faithfully, to live, in these bodies, lives that honor God.

How can we be Christian? Peter shows us how, as Jesus makes plain. Peter professed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. When you say that, say it and truly believe it, that changes everything.

If Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Savior, the Redeemer, God’s Son, then you need to listen to him. You need to listen and to follow. You need to do as he asks and follow his lead, his example. Jesus did not say disregard Scripture. Jesus did not say to ignore or explain away whatever in Scripture does not agree with your current thoughts, feelings, and values. Jesus was not conformed to this world, and the surest sign of that is the cross. The surest affirmation that Jesus was not conformed to this world was that this world had him executed.

Jesus calls us to mindful worship, “the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23-24). St. Paul echoes this call in calling us to “spiritual worship,” mindful worship. Discipleship is mindful worship, thoughtful worship. What is it about thoughtful people that makes them such a blessing? At least in part, it’s the way they show they are thinking of others, and because they are thinking of others, they are feeling toward others. Thoughtful worship engages us with our fellow human beings, our neighbors, and each other, because thoughtful, mindful worship first of all, and above all, engages us with God.

God does not call us to be conformed to this fallen world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

As our minds are renewed, as our mindfulness is renovated, so that we become more thoughtful, more attentive, more alert, more engaged, St. Paul tells us that we also become better able to “discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Apart from that renewal of our minds, then, we cannot really expect to be especially successful at discerning the will of God, of knowing what is good and acceptable and perfect. Apart from God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all we have for discerning what is good is our own human standards. If those human standards were good enough, God would have had no reason to send Christ to us to pull us out of the quicksand in which He saw us sinking. I was sinking. You were sinking, and Jesus stretched out his arms and saved us. On Christ the solid rock I stand.

The Good News is that God did send us Jesus Christ, His Son, the Messiah, not merely like a prophet, as so many thought of him then, and even now. He was not merely a prophet, calling us back to obedience and pronouncing God’s disfavor upon the disobedient. God sent Jesus to be for us the way to life, the way of life, the way to God, the way of God. Peter got it. Paul got it. Neither of them got it through being conformed to this world and the standards and values of the day, of the passing moment. They got it through the renewing of their minds. They got it, they got Jesus, just like you, because of God. Not our way, not our thoughts, but God’s way, God’s thoughts.

Like those apostles, God is transforming you. Pray that God would continue that transformation in you, and, through you, that He might activate that same transformation in others all too conformed, right now, to this world.

And to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.