

A PLACE OF HEAT

It's one of my favorite lines in Scripture: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds" (12.2).

This powerful encouragement from the hand of Paul speaks volumes about the spiritual life of Christians. Our experience as Christians, in or out of the church, has not to do with being passively assimilated into some greater whole; it has to do with alteration and change, growth and "metamorphosis" (which is the actual word that appears there in the Greek).

If a house were used as a metaphor for our life in the hands of God, then, where the prospect of transformation is concerned, we would automatically have to move into the kitchen. After all, it is there in the kitchen where the raw is transmuted into the roasted and the baked. It is there that original ingredients are combined together to form the basis of the almost magical change into breads and cakes. It is there that the chemistry of solid and liquid, in conjunction with catalysts of various sorts, brings forth delights to both eye and stomach. So, under the guidance of the apostle Paul, it is into the kitchen that we are pointed this morning.

In imaginatively moving there, it can be meaningfully suggested that people fall into one of at least three categories, each represented by a different kitchen item. Which of them, I wonder, are we? Listen to the descriptions and determine for yourself.

The first kitchen item is the TUPPERWARE BOWL. Tupperware has been around for some 70 years now, and over that time it has proved itself to be an utterly indispensable means for conveniently storing food items in an airtight container. Just "burp" the lid, and there it is, tucked away so securely that you can take the bowl, turn it upside down, and shake it all around, and that leftover fruit salad or extra gravy is guaranteed not to drop out on the floor or leak all over your clothes.

And while that's good for food, it's not so good in terms of one's spiritual path. You see, believers of the "Tupperware" variety tend to have as well that same hermetically-sealed property to them. It doesn't matter how good or how special the stuff is that has been presented to them--it remains merely stored away there, never to see daylight again, like last week's leftovers stashed in some back corner of the refrigerator. It doesn't matter how great the stuff is that has been deposited into their containers--whatever it is, they keep a lid on it. Thanks to the neglect, it will be promptly forgotten, and eventually it will mold and shrivel up into something completely unrecognizable, worthy only of being thrown out.

In short, for the "Tupperware-believer," there's nothing of transformation to be hoped for. All of its once-promising raw material remains contained and inert, merely packed and stacked away in the darkness of forgetfulness. So much for the "Tupperware" approach to our spirituality.

The second of the kitchen items is the T-FAL PAN. Some years ago we thought Teflon was great, but it is like a horse-and-buggy compared to T-Fal, and its numerous cousins (Silverstone, NuWave, and the like). In each case, applied to the surface of the pan or skillet in question is something totally state-of-the-art--anodized titanium or diamond-infused Duralon. While such cookware demonstrates exceptional durability, by far its greatest feature is that nothing will adhere to it. You can steam it, fry it, sauté it, roast it, sear it, and nothing but nothing will stick to it. When finished, simply wipe it with a cloth, and even the meanest scorches and the worst burns will fall out, leaving the pan looking as good and untouched as new. (Come on now--you've watched that shopping network, too!)

In terms of personality, this space-age improvement is to be found in what we might call the “T-Fal believer.” True to the name, this is the person for whom nothing sticks, either. You can define it, refine it, preach it, teach it, model it, encourage it, speak of it until you’re blue in the face, wearing a clown suit and standing on your head, and nothing but nothing will stick. As soon as this believer stands up for the last hymn, it all drops off like a leaf in a stiff October wind.

For “T-Fal believers,” there’s likewise nothing of transformation to be hoped for, since they’re resistantly the same people that they were way back at the beginning. If it’s transformation that we’re after, “T-Fal believers” are serious disappointments, too. Time after time, with only the slightest effort, the God-given raw potential for a new form slides off and drops away without a trace.

That leaves us with the third and final of our kitchen items, what we might call simply the BOILING POT. In the case here, the thing is not so much the capacity for storage or the ability to resist scratching. Whatever age, size, color, or constitution of the pot, what is the thing is the constant dynamic rolling and bubbling of whatever the pot holds. The thing is the stirred and energetic excitement going on there. In a word, the boiling pot provides space to hold and focus heat.

Those believers who are of the “boiling pot” variety are very distinct from the previous two. The experience of these persons is characterized by an inner life which--sometimes vigorously, often quietly--is always simmering, churning, turning, and swirling about with a process which inevitably changes them from one form to another--which, quite literally, is what the word “transformation” means.

It is these “boiling-believers” on whom rests the hopes for the sort of transformation for which the apostle calls. Transformation calls for heat and for the motion that heat irresistibly instills. It is through that concentrated heat which transformation occurs, as is the case with whatever food item dances around in that boiling pot. Transformation calls for nothing less than a softening, a melting-down, a re-constituting, and a re-forming.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed”

Society, for the sake of its own stability and continuity, requires conformity, the obedient submission of the individual to the standards and goals of the collective. Conformity means striving to be “average,” more or less the same as everyone else, “normal,” we would say--i.e., accommodating the established norms of the group. But that’s not where God would leave us. God instead seeks out all manner of opportunity for a fundamental reworking of the original clay in order that the unique gold in it might be released.

Then, and only then, per Paul’s exhortation in this morning’s reading, will we ever be able truly “never [to] flag in zeal, [and instead to] be aglow with the Spirit, and serve the Lord” (12.11).

Being merely conformed can never meet such a tall order.

So, which do you think that we are? Well, which sounds most like you? Is it Tupperware, or T-Fal, or boiling?

Well, where in your life can you point to the occurrence of transformation?
Where in your life do you see God’s quietly active revolution taking place?
Where in your life do you feel the unmistakable stirring of God’s heat?