

This Age or Any Other

August 23, 2026

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

The circumstances of our lives do not match those of those who first read Paul's Letter to the Romans. We, after all, are not a congregation containing both Jews who had embraced the new Way of Jesus, and Romans who had once worshiped such deities as Jupiter, Vesta, Mithras, or Isis.

Mind you, we are a congregation that contains people from a number of different national and cultural backgrounds, and from several different religious backgrounds, some of which weren't Christian. So... it's still not the same.

We do not live under the authority of the Roman Empire. I grant you that those who wrote the US Constitution were substantially guided by the Roman Republic, and used the Latin "senator" in creating one of the legislative bodies. So... it's still not the same.

But it's close enough that Paul's advice to "not be conformed to this age," meaning the first century around the Mediterranean, is still good advice in the twenty-first century in the Pacific Ocean. We just can't assume that the cultural pressures of the first century Roman Christians he addressed are the same problems we face. We also can't assume that the cultural pressures of the twenty-first century are entirely different from the pressures they faced.

For nearly two thousand years Christianity has worked very hard to create a society in which it was easy to follow Jesus. I'm not convinced that we've been as successful as we'd like. Europe's history of wars between its acknowledged Christian nations – not to mention repeated persecution of non-Christians or not-acknowledged as Christians – has echoes in lots of other non-Christian nations in the course of human history.

What are our cultural pressures? First and foremost, I think, there's pride. Hubris. Arrogance. The conviction that I and I alone am right. The conviction that me and mine are the center. The conviction that my chosen community is the greatest, and by rights should be in charge.

As Elizabeth Shively writes at Working Preacher, "Paul has exhorted his audience to be transformed by the renewal of their mind; now they are to use that new mind to think rightly about themselves and each other: 'I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment ...' (verse 3). Paul calls for a new way of thinking that takes account of others."

I think that Paul addressed that advice about not thinking too highly of yourself as much to himself as to his readers, then and now. Paul was on his best behavior writing to the people he hadn't met in Rome. He wasn't so restrained in his other letters. His arrogance took center stage in parts of Galatians, even daring to call Simon Peter a hypocrite. He was self-aware enough to call himself a fool in Second Corinthians, but only after he'd demonstrated the foolishness of his own ego in response to criticism he'd heard. Yes. It was hard for him. I resonate with that from the inside. I think I've mentioned that I share that temptation to arrogance. It's one of the few things I can claim to share with a saint.

Let's face it, arrogance is a characteristic of Christianity these days. It's not just the Christian nationalists, although their manifestation of hubris is, I think, the most dangerous of our time. In the United Church of Christ, I applaud our advocacy for marginalized groups while noting at the same time our curious reluctance to move beyond certain points, and I note that when the marginalized come into positions of authority, they are just as subject to the temptation of "I know it better than you" as their predecessors had been. I'd dearly love it if we could solve the problem of arrogance by replacing all the male leaders with female, or the straight leaders with LGBTQ, or elder leaders with young ones, or... insert your own preferred group here. Regrettably, it seems like our favorite prayer is not the Lord's Prayer, but what *Pearls Before Swine* cartoonist Stephan Pastis called "The Genius Prayer" in a 2014 strip:

"God grant me the courage to change the things I cannot accept, serenity to accept the things I've changed, and the wisdom to know I'm different."

It's not the only struggle we have with our contemporary world, however. I think one of our strongest pressures is the temptation to put people into arbitrary categories and make assumptions about them based on those categories. I'm pretty confident that the first century members of the Roman church had a similar problem – Paul wrote powerfully that both Jews and Gentiles (whom he called "Greeks") stood in the very same position with God, needing God's mercy. In other letters he wrote of slaves and free people, of men and women, that God's grace, love, and power were accessible to them one and all.

In the twenty-first century, we struggle with prejudices within ourselves, and we struggle with the systematic "isms" that enshrine prejudice in law, culture, and religious practice. We have made progress. In 2021 the Rev. Elizabeth Dilley, who supports authorization of ministers in the UCC, wrote, "...women now make up 52.5% of all ordained ministers in the UCC." At the same time, I'm aware of Christian churches that have rolled back access to leadership positions for women, and others that have simply never opened them at all. On Thursday morning I read a social media post asking for Biblical support for the ordination of women.

People, as we understand ordination, there's not that much Biblical support for the ordination of men.

In addition, we've got people openly calling for the repeal of the nineteenth amendment. That's the one that enfranchises women in the United States of America, that allows them to vote. I thought that question had been settled for a century. I guess we'll have to keep it settled.

More of a concern in the twenty-first century than the first is the temptation to individualism, to think that community is less important than the individual. It's a heritage of the European Enlightenment, and one that was really important to undo the feudal systems of Europe and Asia, which were so arbitrary and oppressive. As with most things, it can be overdone, and it has been. Israel Kamudzandu writes at Working Preacher, "I think of Romans as a call to abandon the sin of individualism and to embrace the cross-cultural Christian life. The life to which Paul calls Christians in Rome, and consequently those in the 21st century, is a life that exhibits the essence of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit."

It's one that embraces the notion that community is important. It's not just about me; it's about us. I don't have all the skills, I don't have all the gifts. Somebody else can better find the 'ohelo; somebody else can fix the plumbing; somebody else can handle the bookkeeping. Look at that list of gifts of the Spirit Paul gave here (he wrote other longer lists in other letters): prophecy, ministry, teaching, encouragement, generosity, leadership, compassion. Any one of us might have some portion of each. Some of us will have deeper reservoirs of one of those gifts, and when we share them in community, everyone does better.

Amy Frykolm, writing at JourneyWithJesus.net, composed a reworked version of Paul's advice here, and it's stunning, so I share it with you:

"So then, I ask you, my dear family, in light of all the mercy, compassion, and kindness that God has shown us, place your whole selves in God's hands — mind, heart, strength — this whole embodied being that is you. Make that offering full of life and vitality, as living as living water. The depth of your spiritual understanding and your willingness will fill the heart of God with joy.

"And do not let the ways of this world — its greed, ambition, empty fulfillments — mold and shape you, make you like itself. Instead be transformed through the renewal of your perceptions. Seek every opportunity to see with new eyes, hear with new ears, try out new paths, feel things for the first time and let them sink into your heart. From your heart, your mind, your senses, and your intuition, let yourself be continuously renewed. In this way, you will know what to do, how to act, how to choose the good, the true, the beautiful, the holy, and the whole."

From the Apostle Paul, from Amy Frykolm, maybe even a little bit from me, there's advice for this age or any other.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson