

August 23rd message

When many of us were young we probably did something foolish. Well, I take that back, it still happens. I know it does to me. The other day I was deleting some files to make more room in my computer and sure enough I deleted my bulletin for this week. So I had to do it over. So much for doing something dumb when you were younger.... Yet back in those days if our parents found out we probably heard something like, “if everybody jumped off a bridge would you too?”

The temptation has always been there to follow the crowd; the temptation has always been there to fit in to what is the going thing. This was true at the time when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. That is why he wrote the words he did in our reading this morning.

At the time of Paul there was much a new Christian could conform to. Sometimes these were mentioned in his other letters. One was for those with a Jewish background to revert back to their strict Jewish customs in addition to this new religion of Christianity. Gentiles new to following Christ often retained pagan practices including idolatry and sexual immorality. In this same light, it was common to worship different gods for different things. What Paul preached of a single, invisible God was seen as a threat to the social and economic practices of the day. And Christians in his time were tempted by the desires of the flesh, the lure of compromise, and the pull of worldly values over the call to follow what Christ taught.

Fast forward to today and we still have many of those same issues. Many see nothing wrong with sexual relations outside of marriage as long as no one gets hurt. Whether we realize it or not many worship idols of many kinds; our society may not think of them as idols but there are. People forget that an idol is anything we love, trust, or value more than God — even good things that become the most important things in our lives.

We see this in many areas. Football season is coming up. Many just don't follow a team or two, their lives become dedicated to their teams winning or losing. We also see a form of idol worship in the way different celebrities are followed and in some cases worshiped. A recent acronym has developed common on social media called FOMO "fear of missing out" is rampant in our society. We have become glued to different media because we want to know the latest news and gossip. Schools in our state and many others now have to develop and implement screen free guidelines for students.

But it's not only younger people who are addicted to their phones. I heard about and read recently tells how millennials are worried about the boomer parents having too much screen time. It tells about a study conducted by AddictionResource.net surveyed 2,000 people between the ages of 59 to 77. It found that more than half said they spent more than 3 hours a day on their phones.

This week I read a pastor's newsletter where he spoke of how summer has gotten so busy and complicated. He spoke of how summer used to be a time of relaxation and cookouts with family and friends, trips to the pool, maybe a family vacation just for enjoyment. He spoke of how we have become a culture that worships busyness. He concluded we have forgotten the whole concept of rest as defined by the Sabbath.

As I read Paul's verse about not being conformed to this world, I thought of how these things and others can rub off on us and influence us. We can become indoctrinated to what our current culture places value on. We see this in the push of consumerism which basically states the more you have the happier you'll be. We also see this in the culture of hate and divisiveness that has manifested itself in our society. We can disagree when it comes to matters of public policy but now much too often it is done with no love for one's neighbor or attempts to find common ground. We should not conform to such an attitude.

Fortunately there is hope. Be transformed, Paul tells, by the renewing of our minds. This just doesn't happen, even though we may do our best to avoid what is prevalent in our culture. We need the power of the Spirit to renew and redirect our minds through prayer and diligence.

Often people count themselves short and don't realize what they are capable of. There are many examples of this in the Bible including Moses in Exodus 4:10 when he says "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." Yet, he becomes a great spokesman and leader for the Israelites.

Paul uses the example of the body to teach how Christians should live and work together. While all of us have different strengths and weaknesses, Paul emphasizes how Christians can utilize the gifts each has. I have witnessed this all my life. Growing up in the church I can think of many, many people from my youth that used their God-given gifts to build up that body of Christ. I remember Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, church secretaries, different farmers and town people I knew who used their abilities to strengthen the church. I have also seen that in my 45 years at the church I attend in Keokuk and in the years I've been here.

The Greek word Paul used to describe the gifts we have what we all have is charisma. Today the same word refers to someone with a popular appeal and followings. We see this in political circles, comedians, with actors, and to a degree with ministers.

I guess one time there was a small town preacher who was pretty good at improvising his sermons. He had a pretty good following in the town because he had a reputation for great preaching. One Saturday night he told his wife I'm going to relate the gospel lesson to horseback riding. His wife was stunned, "you hardly know a thing about horseback riding, I'm not going if you preach on that." On the way to church that morning the minister realized his wife was right and decided to relate the gospel on love and intimacy in marriage. The next day at the grocery store the minister's wife ran into a lady who heard his sermon. She told her how

great his message was. In fact, it was one of the best she had ever heard! The minister's wife was flabbergasted. "Why in all his life he's only done it two times, once before we were married and once after and he fell off both times!

Again everyone has charisma or what Paul defines as a gift or favor from God. Most, if not all of us who are older should know what we have been blessed with. The challenge then of course is for us to identify them and use them for the good of the kingdom. Paul tells how we must exercise them accordingly. I, like many of you, have learned my limitations on certain things. I can remember studying in college and how was not one of those all-nighter study guys before a big test, I had to study and review days ahead. It's the same with my sermons, I have found I have to study the scripture and gather some thoughts I over the course of several days constantly reviewing. I'm guessing all of us have learned something about ourselves over the years about what we're not so good at. Yes, we could work at it and perhaps improve, but sometimes the ability just isn't there, like my golf game.....

Not everyone has the gift of prophecy or teaching or leadership or the others mentioned. But we all have something. If we look at our life's career choice we can see how our life's skills can benefit the church. Many of us are good listeners. That has always been and is a gift much needed in our world. Some of us are very good at organizing; our life's work has demanded that. How could that be useful to this body of Christ?

Often overlooked in this list in the gift of service; many of us have been blessed with that ability. We often help someone at a moment's notice without much giving it much thought. Isn't that the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

Our final hymn, "Who is on the Lord's Side?" Is based on Exodus 32:26, "then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered around him." Even though it was written in 1877 its words encouraging Christian commitment still ring true today.

May we be faithful to our call as Christians living during this time and in the words of the hymn, “by thy grace divine, we are on the Lord’s side, Savior, we are Thine.”

Amen.