

“The Virtue of Conformity”

2004 Commencement Address

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President Byker, Members of the Board of Trustees, representatives from the class of 1954 and other distinguished guests, faculty colleagues, friends and family, Calvin College graduates of 2004:

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:28-29).

I have been puzzling over these words from the Epistle to the Romans for the past several weeks. There is so very much to dislike about them: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed* to the image of his Son, that he might be the *firstborn* among many brothers.”

Here at Calvin we are rather fond of the word “transform.” Indeed, the preface to our Core Curriculum reminds us that one of the primary goals of your education the last four years has been to prepare you to go out into society as “agents of transformation.” On the other hand, we don’t much like the word “conformity.” It conjures up images of tidy rules and tidy minds and tidy solutions to complex problems; or it calls to mind surreal reality shows on television where so-called ugly ducklings submit to plastic surgery, hoping to emerge into swans whose beauty will conform to an impossible commercial ideal. When we hear “conformity,” we think of rigidity, inflexibility, control, extinction of personality; or perhaps we imagine row upon row of decorously black-robed persons sitting shoulder to shoulder on small uniform folding chairs, barely containing their impulse to stand up, shout, throw their hats in the air, or otherwise reassert their unique personalities. Something about conformity makes us want to burst its boundaries, to transgress its limits, to be ourselves—distinct and individual.

And then there’s that image of the older brother; the Son, this verse from Romans tells us, is to be the firstborn among many brothers, the oldest brother in a large family.

Now, I have an older brother, and I must confess that at times I’ve been somewhat resentful of his authority. When I was very young, my brother developed a mania for stamp collecting, and I was pressed into service as his assistant. I spent hours at the bathroom sink dutifully soaking bright-colored squares off envelopes and sticking them onto the tiles to dry. I undertook this menial labor in the hope that one day I might be allowed to lick one of the delicate paper hinges, attach it carefully to the back of a small stamp, and then place the hinged stamp into its proper place in the vinyl-bound stamp album. Alas for such hopes. “You have too much spit,” my brother pronounced. “You’ll make the hinge too wet and the stamp won’t stick properly.” And all my protestations of a dry mouth to the

contrary, he remained adamant. I could take the stamps off the envelopes, but only Jim could bring them lovingly to rest in their album home.

Elder brothers in the Bible are often far worse role models than my brother Jim, who was, in fact, a kind and considerate older brother. It was Cain, the elder brother, who killed Abel; Esau, the elder brother, who sold his birthright; Eliab, the eldest brother, who roundly excoriated David when he suggested that someone should fight Goliath.

To bring “conformity” and “elder brother” together in a single sentence then, is to stir up an uneasy brew of coercion, sibling rivalry, expectations, impossible standards, and possible failure. Jane Kenyon puts it this way:

Only Mama and I were at home.
We ate tomato sandwiches
with sweeps of mayonnaise
on indifferent white bread.

Surely it was September,
my older brother at school.
The tomatoes were fragrant
and richly red, perhaps the last
before frost.

I was alert to the joy of eating
sandwiches alone with Mama, bare
feet braced on the underpinnings
of the abraded kitchen table.

Once I'd made a mark in the wood
by pressing too hard as I traced
the outline of a horse.

I was no good at drawing—from life,
or from imagination. My brother
was good at it, and I was alert
to that, too.

Yet Kenyon is alert here not just to one, but to two things: her failure to conform to her brother's perfection—yes—but also her quiet “joy of eating sandwiches alone with Mama.” So, too, the verse we have been considering, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers,” is set in the context of joy, delight, freedom, and love.

For we must unclutter our minds of all those images of conformity I conjured up a few moments ago: rigidity, inflexibility, control, extinction of personality. The straight edges and unyielding demands that the Apostle Paul associates with law cannot be “conformity to the image of God's Son,” because bondage to that law is exactly that from which we have been set free by Jesus Christ, through the Spirit. Rather, “conformity to the image of his Son,” is *con-forming* in the old sense of that word as harmonizing with, or being shaped by, another person. It is a virtue,

a habit of being to be cultivated. As Scott Cairns, in his poem simply entitled “Grace,” tells us, it is to “adopt / the drape of love’s body and find your own.”

So, to be conformed to the image of Christ is not to subscribe to a set of rules nor even to line yourself up alongside a perfect model; it is rather to find yourself in an embrace, face to face, flesh relaxing into the contours of flesh, so that, by degrees, you find yourself molded into the shape of love’s body.

To be conformed to the image of Christ is to find yourself in an embrace that you did not initiate, drawn by a love so strong it can only be called “desire.” “Long before you knew desire,” Cairns writes,

Desire turned
to you, saw you as you are even now—
unlovely, a little embarrassed, dead. . . .

[And] thereafter under the influence
of Desire’s instruction, you made desire

the new light by which you would dare proceed,
and it has led you here, where you adopt
the drape of love’s body and find your own.

Grace is God’s desire to reawaken us to the fullness of the image he has created, to reanimate our lifeless souls. It is the life-giving kiss imagined in the old fairy tales--the princess kissing the frog; the prince kissing the sleeping lady—where love turns us not into a mirror-image of the beloved, but into our own true selves.

It is grace that draws Mary of Bethany to the feet of Jesus, to listen to his words and to pour out her perfume, adopting the drape of love’s body as she bends to wipe his feet with her hair. It is grace that draws us to both the extravagant and the quiet practices that form and nourish love.

In the litany of elder brothers that I noted earlier—Cain, Esau, Eliab—I neglected to mention the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. You remember him, of course. He was the good son, the perfect older brother, the one who stayed home with his father, who worked the land, who didn’t ask for his inheritance in advance, who didn’t spend a fortune in the far country and then come creeping home begging for forgiveness. He is the one who, hearing the loud music and the laughter, refuses to come into the house, refuses his father, refuses the embrace of his younger brother.

But Jesus, who tells the story of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Elder Brother is himself the true older brother: the one who not only will run with the Father down the path to embrace his profligate sibling, but who also will journey to the far country, enter that pig-pen, and bring the prodigal home, for

Long before you knew desire, Desire turned
to you, saw you as you are even now—
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and it has led you here, where you adopt
the drape of love's body and find your own.

As you leave Calvin, you will need this embrace.

For you, as have all of us, will fail. One day, as did Jane Kenyon, you will sit down at a kitchen table to draw, and you will try too hard, and the horse will turn out badly; and you will be alert to your failure.

Others will also fail *you*—but you already know that; you know that we live in a broken, often desperate, world.

You, as have all of us, will be tempted—to give up, to withdraw, to measure out your love in teaspoonfuls, to guard your heart.

And you will, as the letter from the Reunion Class of 1954 reminds you, suffer more pain than you can now imagine.

But you will not be abandoned; because grace calls you; it awakens in you the desire for God; it draws you into the embrace of the elder brother who will never chide you, never hold you at arm's length, never make you pay back the inheritance you have squandered, but will gather you close in love's embrace as you adopt the drape of love's body and find yourself.

It is within that secure embrace that you will cultivate those virtues that will enable you to become the “agents of transformation” for which we hope your Calvin education has prepared you. You *will* be teachers, and lawyers, and doctors, and parents, and artists, and writers. You *will* work in business, and politics, and the military, and for many non-profit organizations. You *will* go to Ecuador to help children who suffer from cerebral palsy, and you *will* welcome dozens of foster kids into your home. And in all these endeavors, you will, if you are conformed to the image of Christ, be transforming the world one square inch at a time.

So know this, beloved students, dear friends: Jesus, your elder brother, will never let you go. And so I pray that you may come increasingly to know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and that, as you go out into the world, you may rest securely within the embrace of his grace.

Drawing from the Past

Only Mama and I were at home.
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was good at it, and I was alert
to that, too.

(Jane Kenyon, *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1996. 11)

Grace (from "Disciplinary Treatises")

Long before you knew desire, Desire turned
to you, saw you as you are even now—
unlovely, a little embarrassed, dead.

Can you remember the throat's pure pulse first
waking you to a longing you could
neither fix to a name, nor satisfy?

Probably not. But it must have happened.
For thereafter under the influence
of Desire's instruction, you made desire

the new light by which you would dare proceed,
and it has led you here, where you adopt
the drape of love's body and find your own.

(Scott Cairns, *Philokalia: New and Selected Poems*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Zoo Press, 2002. 130. Originally published
in *Figures for the Ghost*, 1994)