

July 26 – Feeling the Squeeze

Romans 12:1-8

Today is a follow up to last week's sermon where we were talking about how to discern what is right. It comes out of many discussions in our reflection study that meets on Sunday after church. Several times Shirley Anderson has said, "It is so hard to be a Christian today." What she is referring to is that we live in a world where there is such intense polarization it seems as if anything you say or do as a Christian is criticized. Not just from the outside, but from within the Christian community. You are too liberal or too conservative. You are too legalistic or too laissez faire. How do you find peace for your soul in a faith that tends to try and pull you apart? Several times Shirley has said, "You should preach about this!" So, today I am.

Paul talks about not being conformed to the world. One translation calls it being squeezed into the world's mold. In the past it was relatively simple to talk about what to do in these situations. I am not saying it was easy to accomplish, but at least easy to talk about. The Christian faith was more or less in agreement concerning most great social struggles. We might argue about baptism and who is welcome at the communion table but on most other subjects we were united. Almost two hundred years ago that unity began to dissolve. People of faith aligned on both sides of the slavery issue. It ultimately split most of the churches in the country along pro and anti-slavery lines. Since then more and more we see churches taking opposing views on a host of topics among them the place of women in church leadership, civil rights, abortion, and the Christian response to the GLBT population. Alliances keep shifting with certain groups coming together on one issue and being in opposition to each other on some other topic. We spend so much time screaming at one another about what it means to be faithful that we have lost our voice in society.

As I said, in the past to preach about not being squeezed into the world's mold was easy. You would talk about not letting the allure of wealth or power make you give up Christian principals of service and charity. This is still true, by the way. Now, we as Christians are faced with sisters and brothers of faith trying to squeeze us into their mold. If we support a social issue that some see as liberal and giving up the Bible we are told

that we have let the world dictate our decisions. If we remain steadfast on old principals we are told that we are harsh, judgmental and not following Jesus' commands to love.

Is it any wonder that many are turning away from the church? Is it any wonder that many no longer share that they go to church, or only mention it to others who go to their church. No one wants to be continually pummeled and told they are wrong if they don't believe such and such. It is so hard to know what to do.

Paul said, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." What we seem to be facing today are a multitude of molds with incredible pressure applied to us to conform. This pressure happens here. A few weeks ago during joys and concerns there was a joy expressed over the recent Supreme Court decision allowing GBLT people to marry in all 50 states. I responded as our bishop had responded saying that this court decision brought many great joy and many great pain. We need to acknowledge both sets of feelings and see how we can work together. I assumed some of the more progressive type would be disappointed with me for not fully embracing their opinion. What happened shocked me. A couple visiting wrote me a very negative email afterwards. They quoted the scriptures from the Bible concerning the prohibition of same sex marriage and said I was acting recklessly for encouraging us to work together. They wanted me to stand up and tell everyone how wrong this decision was and how we should oppose it with any means possible. For them I wasn't angry or nasty enough on this issue to be a pastor they supported. They were so upset that they went to the bank and stopped payment on the check they had put in the offering. All of this because I talked about unity and working at finding a path of reconciliation. How do you live as a person of faith and integrity in a world such as this?

First I would challenge you to make your own decisions after careful study. In a world of increasing polarization of thought and instant access to news we have quit doing much in the way of personal research. We flip on the t.v. and are told what to believe. And what you are told is wildly divergent depending upon whether or not you click on Fox News and Bill O'Reilly or MSN with Rachel Maddow. Both will tell you that they have done the research, that what they are sharing is unbiased and yet any casual observer will see quickly that each presents the facts from a particular slant. Call it what

you will, right wing or left wing, liberal or conservative, tea party or progressive, we live in an age where you can insulate yourself from opinions that are contrary to what you believe. The information comes as news so we want to hold onto the illusion it is fair and unbiased. This is part of the problem as to why it is so hard to be a Christian and we are beginning to understand the forces arrayed against us to squeeze us into their version of reality. And what I say for political processes happens within the church as well. You can get your faith beliefs handed to you by the Good News Fellowship or the Federation for Social Action.

We need to step back and do some research on our own. When faced with an issue we need to read and listen to opinions from the other side. This is hard when we know what we believe is right. But only as we are informed as to all points on an issue can we make a decision that is our own and not one handed to us. Also, when we know what others are saying we can reflect upon it and come to some understanding why we believe the way we do. It is all about being in dialogue. We don't like that word dialogue because it means we have to be open to change. But it also makes us aware of the pressures forcing us to conform.

Also, we need to continue to ask what is right. Whenever there is an issue of great social import, if we find ourselves on the "other side" of social trends we must ask, "Are we being faithful or stubborn?" "Are we supporting what is comfortable for us or what is right?" "Are we following Jesus?"

This means that we need to be open to change. Sometimes we need to be squeezed into a new mold! Faith is dynamic and changing. Our perceptions of today are not those of our parents or grandparents. Sometimes we lament the "moral decay" of society but sometimes we also celebrate how we have been open to the Spirit causing us to change. As a nation we fought a war to end slavery and proclaim that all are created equal. We still struggle with everyone granting people the dignity they deserve.

We, as a nation were shocked by the senseless murder of nine people in an A.M.E. church in Charleston. The ensuing conversation about the confederate battle flag is an awesome current example of people trying to apply the questions I have

suggested. For more than 50 years people accepted that the confederate flag was a symbol to honor those who had died from the South during the Civil War. Since that time people have researched its history. The research shows that it was not the flag of the confederacy. That surprised a lot of people. It was a battle flag for just one confederate army, the Army of Northern Virginia. When Lee and his army was defeated he told his followers to stow the flag away. He refused to have it flown as his funeral. It was unused, for the most part, until the early part of the last century when it became a flag associated with white rights and the KKK. It was placed on the capital of Charleston at the beginning of the Civil Rights Campaign. It was supposedly to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Civil War but for many was seen as sending a message to Washington DC concerning the proposed voting rights act. Many hearing this history began to dialogue with people of African American descent. Those conversations led to an awareness that for them it isn't a historical symbol but a reminder that they are still not equal. It gives great them pain. As one person said, "How would you like to, every day of your life, see a battle flag that people marched under to keep you enslaved?" This has led to many asking what is right? Retailers and others have pulled items with the flag off of their shelves. Some yell about giving in to political correctness but most are siding with our black brothers and sisters. As one white person said, "The south fought a war to fly that flag. They lost. Get over it." And in an historic move South Carolina in support of the nine who were killed removed the flag from the state house grounds. Other southern states are talking about doing the same thing. Our society has shifted on this issue. This is a time where it has been good to be squeezed out of an old mold into a new one. Other topics are not so easy or clear.

We live in challenging times to be a Christian. We are under great pressure from without and within. That is one of the reasons we need a church family. Here, we are blessed and supported. We understand that our views on issues might be different from others who are worshipping this day in Sequim. We need to continue to be in dialogue, and that is all right. Diversity is not a bad thing. But each of us needs a loving space to live our faith as we understand it, but we also pray that God challenges us to grow in love, forgiveness and grace to all, for that is the ultimate message of Jesus.