

# THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

MARCH 15, 2009

The word “conformity” has taken on a very negative connotation in our society today. For many, the word conformity indicates a desire to be just like everyone else, a fear to be different. A conformist is viewed as someone who pays allegiance to society’s conventions, a “yes-person” and a follower. Sinclair Lewis portrayed such a man in the classic novel Babbitt. People who do not conform, who march to the beat of a different drummer, are considered “characters”. It is a sign of the times that one television station advertises itself as a place, “Where characters are welcome.”

The real issue, however, is not one of conformity vs. non-conformity. The questions we should be asking are “Conformity to whom?” “Conformity to what?” To whose voice do I listen and try to conform my life? The scripture readings for today speak directly to this topic. In the Book of Exodus, God tells His people that they will find true and lasting happiness by conforming their lives to God’s laws as they are outlined in the Ten Commandments. God tells the Israelites that shaping their lives in obedience to His law will draw down on them the blessings of His mercy and protection. Submission to God’s law teaches the human family how to achieve inner peace and how to live in peace with fellow human beings.

St. John’s gospel develops the issue of conformity vs. non-conformity even further. In the gospel account of the money changers in the temple we see the difference between God’s laws and man-made laws. The reason for God’s law is the ultimate happiness of the human family. Man-made law is sometimes flawed by the selfishness of the law maker. Money changers told the Israelites that they could not offer their money to God unless it was first changed from Roman money to special “temple coins.” An unfair rate was charged for this service and the moneychangers kept the extra for themselves. Similarly, animals brought for sacrifice were required to be without blemish. The Pharisees took advantage of that law. They inspected the animals the people brought looking for some

small insignificant defect that would cause them to reject the animal. Then they told the worshipper he must buy one of their own, pre-approved animals. These animals were no better than the ones brought by the people themselves, yet the worshippers were charged exorbitant prices. Practices such as these were readily accepted as the norm in the society of Jesus’ time. Such blatant dishonesty was, however, a corruption of the man-made laws governing temple sacrifices. It was this corruption of the law that Jesus stood up against. Jesus could not, in conscience, allow the Temple to be defiled by dishonest practices. Conforming His life to God’s law meant that Jesus became a non-conforming member of society.

Today’s financial crisis hints at the kind of greed and dishonesty we see in the money changers. Lent provides an opportunity to examine the integrity of our lives. Are we listening to God’s voice and conforming our lives to His will as it is expressed in the Ten Commandments? Do we try to live justly and honestly in the world, or are we taking our cues from conventional society and how it often bends the law? When we become aware of such exploitation, do we follow Jesus’ example and defend the truth? This kind of non-conformity takes a great deal of courage. Asking such important questions is the whole reason for Lent. A quote from J.C. Watts provides food for thought. “Character is doing the right thing when nobody’s looking. There are too many people who think that the only thing that’s right is to get by, and the only thing that’s wrong is to get caught.”



*I will place my law within them  
and I write it upon their hearts*

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*Exodus 20: 1-17*

*1 Corinthians 1: 22-25*

*John 2: 13-25*