

The Origin of “Therefore”

Romans 11: 33- 12:8

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been God’s counselor?”

“Or who has given God a gift, to receive a gift in return?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; he exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Just a warning: today will be a different type of “sermon.” One I hope sheds light on what is so often confusing about St. Paul’s writings. So often we parachute into a “Therefore” section of St. Paul’s writings. Yet, to understand what St. Paul is trying to get at theologically and practically—arguably throughout all of his letters—I would like us to imagine taking the wide-angle approach.

In a general sense, St. Paul is trying to say that something has happened. Something huge, which applies to the entirety of creation. Something which has inverted everything which he once thought was true. It’s like that old 90’s Steve Martin film *Leap of Faith*. Martin plays a charlatan television preacher who is masterful at scamming his audience into believing healings are being performed on his stage. He orchestrates gimmicks which illude to people being able to see again. He stages well produced miracles as he rakes in the cash by extorting people’s desperate needs and simple faith. Except, at the end of the movie, in the middle of one of his revivals, a genuinely crippled boy comes forward asking to be healed. Martin, not knowing what else to do in, especially in front of the crowd, does his usual antics while praying over the boy. At first the boy tumbles while trying to walk, to which Martin, trying to preserve his schtick looks out into the audience and says, “Someone here is lacking in faith!” But then the boy tries again and to Martin’s surprise the boy leaves his walkers on the floor, and begins taking his first steps. Martin, whose jaw has hit the floor in disbelief, snaps back into the schtick saying, “Another miracle! Praise Jesus!” But here’s the surprise: in the midst of the illusion, something very Real (capital

“R”) happens and breaks through the false construct which both exposes him and transforms him at the same time.

Something similar happens to St. Paul. Not that Paul was a con artist, but he was a machine man; a system pawn, a servant of the institution who held a zeal for persecuting those who followed Jesus. He was going after those who he thought were religious frauds, only to realize that he was the one being the fraud. And it inverts everything he had thought he had known about his faith and who he is.

Maybe you’ve had a moment. A moment that breaks into our lives and shakes up how we think about faith. Perhaps it was when we got knocked off our horse: the sudden shock of a loved one dying, a cancer scare. Or after a healing or a reconciliation. Something happens in these moments which forces us to see life—and perhaps faith—through a completely new lens. I had a conversation a couple of weeks ago with a self-identified atheist who is also a young physician. He wanted to talk about how he “lost his faith.” He says it happened after working in the hospice unit for children. Amongst such grief, he couldn’t make sense of how a loving God could allow such horrific things to happen.

He was confronted with something far more real than that which he was taught about his faith. It knocked him off his horse. It made him question everything he once believed. But what he calls losing his faith was actually the process of enriching his faith—if he would allow it. The experiences we have shake up our faith and our understanding of God. It shaped St. Paul’s understanding as well. Therefore, this is the lens through which we are to understand what he is saying.

So when we hear, “Do not be conformed to this world,” St. Paul knows what it is like to conform to the world and so do we. Systems which we have all inherited which have the power to run our lives. The 24/7 propaganda cycles, the bonding over having a common enemy, the corporate machine whose greed knows no limits, and even religious circles whose biblical beliefs bully others while they believe themselves to be doing God’s work. All of it, St. Paul says, are false constructs of our world. He knows! Yet, within these false constructs Jesus breaks in with something more capital “R” Real saying,

“I know you *thought* you had to play this game in order to get ahead, or survive, or to be someone. And because I know these are the only rules of the game you have learned, I am here to show you that I want us to play a different kind of game. Because God really likes you, is genuinely for you, starting at exactly where you are.”

One of my early childhood memories was from grade school. Before the bell rang the class would get into a single file line with our backs against the wall. There was one kid who the rest of the class would repeatedly pick on by making a game out of pushing the young boy’s head into the wall behind him. It was awfully cruel. One day I happened to be standing next to him, minding my own business. But then the other kids in line began to “psst” at me, making gestures which invited me to join the game of pushing the lad’s head into the wall. The internal tug-of-war began. I knew it wasn’t right. But the gravitational pull of my own desire to be a part of the group sucked me in and I got swept up in the undercurrent of their desire...and I did it.

The boy began to cry, of course. I got scolded by the teacher. But here's the more Real thing that happened: I don't know if the boy was coached to do this or if he was simply fed up. But the next day during a recess break the boy approached me and asked, "Why did you hurt me?" Of course, I had no answer. I was merely trying to fit in by participating in the game everyone else was playing. But the vulnerable intelligence of this young boy—the intelligence of the victim—it unstitched me. It knocked me off my horse. It revealed more about me and the charlatan game we all can get swept up in without realizing it. It's what Jesus did to St. Paul as well: "Why are you persecuting me? Now let's play a different game—a far richer and more joyful game where everyone wins." Now to those who are stuck in the old game, it seems foolish. But to those who are willing to offer themselves to the new game: that's the stuff of transformation; of a New Creation.

Of course, we constantly find ourselves in the tug-of-war between these two games. After all, we need paychecks. We need to survive. We feel like we need to play the system's game to get ahead. But for those of us who are a part of the new game, we are conduits of an indestructible power who offer ourselves—plural—as a living sacrifice in the midst of an otherwise failing world. Which isn't a moral imperative at all. But is simply who we become when we are face to face with the presence of the capital "R" Real God.

Therefore, we bless backpacks. We send teachers out to shape minds. We bless children who journey into another year of growth. We encourage those who are bullied to trust that they aren't alone, and that they hold a far greater transformative power than they realize. And while we strive to change all the false systems and narratives, we also "therefore" we offer ourselves (plural) as a living sacrifice as we enter into the flow of God's inscrutable and transformational grace. For from him and through him and to him are all things. Forever and ever. Amen.