Exodus 1:8-2:10

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

I want to do something a little different today. I want to tell the story of a man who died a week ago, at the age of 84. So that at the time of this country’s most turbulent domestic crises of the 20th century – in the 1960s and 70s – this man was young. And he devoted himself to those crises, things like civil rights and the Vietnam War. What is noteworthy is that his activism took the form of humor. He was a stand-up comic, a social activist, and a man of color. His name is Dick Gregory.

He set out in a calm, dignified way to break the back of a distinctly American form of theater called the minstrel show. There’s a museum at Ferris State University in Michigan that describes minstrels as music and comedy shows that portray Black people as “dim-witted, lazy, superstitious and happy-go-lucky.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This image of Black entertainers was the only one White America had until Dick Gregory.

His breakthrough as a comic came when the Playboy Club in Chicago needed a fill-in. Gregory had been working small, all-black clubs in Chicago when a Playboy executive saw him perform and recognized talent. He was recruited for the club. Never mind that his debut show was a convention of White, frozen-food-industry executives from the South.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” the 28-year-old Gregory began. “I understand there are a good many Southerners in the room tonight. I know the South very well. I spent 20 years there one night.”

He continued, “Last time I was down South, I walked into a restaurant, and this White waitress came up to me and said: ‘We don’t serve colored people here.’ I said: ‘That’s all right, I don’t eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken.’ ”

Despite enduring what he later said were some “dirty, insulting statements” from a few audience members, the heckling soon stopped as Gregory won them over with his provocative but non-belligerent form of satire.

“Segregation is not all bad,” he said on stage. “Have you ever heard of a wreck where the people in the back of the bus got hurt?” What was supposed to be a 55-minute show went on for an hour-and-40-minutes. By the time it was over, the audience gave him thundering applause.

There wasn’t a healthy race joke in America when he performed that routine. The jokes were all derogatory to one race or another. Dick Gregory helped change that. He gave us a healthy way to laugh about racial differences, while not denying that those differences were real and painful. Dick Gregory also gave us a Black entertainer who wasn’t an Amos-and-Andy buffoon but an intelligent, thinking American.

In fact, he served in the Armed Forces as a very young man, mostly entertaining the troops. He once explained how the Army had charged him $85 when he lost his rifle, adding: “That’s why in the Navy, the captain always goes down with the ship.”

A few years later he commented on the feared Soviet Prime Minister, Nikita Khrushchev: “Wouldn’t it be funny,” he said, “if Khrushchev really didn’t hate us, but his interpreter did?”

Health issues became important to him. He eventually founded a company that sold weight-loss products. On his own health he once said, “I been reading so much about cigarettes and cancer, I quit reading.” Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He quit drinking and smoking, and became a vegetarian. He even wrote a cookbook, among many other titles.

In the late 1960s, he began going on 40-day fasts to protest the Vietnam War. Ten years later, during the hostage crisis in Iran, he flew there and began a fast, had a “ceremonial visit” with radical cleric Ayatollah Khomeini and met with the revolutionary students who had taken 52 Americans captive in the US embassy. He returned home after five months, weighing 106 pounds.

In between writing books and speaking on health and social issues, Gregory continued his activism, even in old age. In the year 2000, when he was 67, he went to New York and then Detroit to protest police brutality in those cities. He also went to Kentucky that year to demand the hiring of Black school principals. Ten years later, when he was 77, he announced his plan to go on a 30-day fast to keep public awareness focused on Haiti. This was right after the 2010 earthquake that devastated the country.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I was saddened to hear of Dick Gregory’s passing but amazed to learn about the content of his life, and the rigorous way in which he lived out his principles. But why this extended eulogy? For someone who wasn’t a member of our parish? Or that none of us even knew personally? It’s because of that little sentence in today’s second reading – the one from Romans that says: “Do not be conformed to this world.” There’s a second half to that sentence but let’s leave it for now.

Do not be conformed to this world. Don’t accept without question that the way things are, are the way they ought to be. Society pressures us to conform, adopt, agree, fit in. And that’s what we want to do! We humans are pack animals. Not loners. We need one another and our society. But do not be conformed to the ways of this world because it seldom aligns with the ways of God. Dick Gregory was a non-conformist, and that warrants our attention. We need to know what that looks like.

He once told an audience about his social activism: “This isn’t a revolution of Black against White. This is a revolution of right against wrong. And right has never lost.” Which brings us to the rest of the sentence from Romans. “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.”

We Christians can work ourselves into quite a lather about discerning the will of God. But there it is, right there, in Romans! Whatever is good is God’s will. Whatever is perfect; whatever is right. We know that injustice isn’t right. So it isn’t God’s will. We know that harming others and the environment is not right. It isn’t God’s will. We know that hating one another for whatever reason – skin color, politics, ethnicity – is not right. Whenever something is wrong we are not to accept it.

Of course, someone has wisely noted that we Christians, in figuring out God’s will, seldom have to choose between good and bad. Mostly we have to choose between good and good. And that’s where transformation comes in, another part of that little sentence from Romans. “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.”

I used to think that transformation was like the old Army slogan: “Be all you can be.” But I think about it differently now. I think being transformed means being in the presence of God. It means being interested in the presence of God. To be in God’s presence – to abide, as Jesus calls it – takes a certain kind of consciousness – a transformed consciousness – that allows us to stay open to the Holy in an ongoing way. Doing this – this abiding – takes cultivation – what Romans calls “renewing of the mind” – to stay in that open yielded-ness to God. It takes practice: in prayer, contemplation, worship and gratitude. Now that would make a nice slogan: Practice Gratitude. That is one of the single most powerful ways to renew the mind! Practice being grateful.

To be transformed is to live one’s life in God’s presence. We become God-centric. God ceases to be an object of religion and becomes friend, intimate, the lover of our soul. In this state it may still be hard to choose between good and good, but then, very little in life that is worthwhile is easy.

Don’t conform just because it’s always been so in your life, your family, your town or your society. It isn’t a matter of who comes out on top. It is a matter of right and wrong, and Dick Gregory told us that right has never lost. Be all you can be, certainly, but mostly be in the presence of God.

1. “The Coon Character,” Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University [Big Rapids, Michigan]. Retrieved 29 January 2016 for the article, “Minstrel Show,” online at Wikipedia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dennis McLellan, “Dick Gregory, who rose from poverty to become a groundbreaking comedian and civil rights activist, dies at 84,” [www.latimes.com/local/obituaries](http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries), August 19, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)