

The Kingdom of Barking Pigs Romans 12:1-2

One of my favorite books is a little volume by Michael Yaconelli entitled, “Messy Spirituality.” In his book, Yaconelli tells the story of Norman, a little boy who chose to be different.

The story begins when Norman’s teacher announces that the class is going to present the play, *Cinderella*, at the spring teacher’s conference.

Immediately, almost every girl yelled, “I want to be Cinderella,” and most of the boys shouted, “I want to be the Handsome Prince.” Of course, everyone could not be Cinderella or The Handsome Prince, but by the end of the day, the teacher was able to assign a part to everyone.

Well, almost everyone. Everyone except Norman. Norman was a quiet child. He wasn’t really shy or bashful; he just didn’t say anything unless he really had something to say.

When the teacher realized Norman was the only child without a part she said, “Norman, what character would like to be?”

Without hesitation Norman said, “I would like to be the pig.”

As you can imagine, Norman’s classmates started laughing, but that didn’t seem to bother Norman. Somewhat embarrassed for Norman, the teacher replied, “Norman, I’m sorry, but there is no pig in *Cinderella*.”

Norman just smiled and said, “There is now.”

At the first rehearsal, Norman came out in his pig costume – a paper cup for a nose and pink, long, underwear with a pipe-cleaner tail. Norman’s pig

followed Cinderella around wherever she went and became a mirror of the action on stage. If Cinderella was happy, the pig was happy; if Cinderella was sad, the pig was sad.

At the end of the play, when the handsome prince placed the glass slipper on Cinderella's foot, Norman went wild with joy, danced around on his hind legs, and broke his silence by barking.

In rehearsal, the teacher tried explaining to Norman that even if there was a pig in *Cinderella*, pigs don't bark. But again Norman explained, "This pig barks." And the barking, she had to admit, was well done.

The presentation at the teachers' conference was a smash hit. And at the curtain call, guess who received a standing ovation? You guessed it. It was Norman, the barking pig.

I like Norman. I like Norman because Norman reminds me of Jesus. Granted, Jesus didn't ever play the part of a barking pig, but Jesus wasn't afraid to be different.

When the scribes and Pharisees screamed, "Messiah's don't eat with sinners," Jesus said, "This one does." When the religious leaders chided, "Messiah's don't heal on the Sabbath," Jesus replied, "They do now." And when an entire world stood at the foot of the cross watching God's Son die, they cried out, "Messiah's don't die on a cross," but Jesus simply turned and said, "This one does, and it is finished."

Yes, Jesus and Norman had something in common. Both insisted on living lives by their own standard instead of living life like everyone else.

In today's text, the Apostle Paul calls for you and me to become part of The Kingdom of Barking Pigs. Of course, he doesn't use those exact words, but the message is still the same. In these two short verses, Paul calls upon the followers of Jesus Christ to live in a way that differs from the way others live.

Listen to these words found in Romans 12:1-2. I'm reading from *The New Century Version* of the Bible. As Paul writes to the Romans he says, *So brothers and sisters, since God has shown us great mercy, I beg you to offer your lives as a living sacrifice to him. Your offering must be only for God and pleasing to him, which is the spiritual way for you to worship.*² *Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect.*

Did you hear what Paul said in verse two? He said, *“Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking.”*

In this passage, Paul tells us that God wants us to be special, to be different, to live our lives in unique ways, and to stop looking around to see if we are like everyone else.

Paul tells us that Christians should not live like the people of a sinful society. Christians should be different. Instead of being like everyone else, we

should live by a unique standard, a standard modeled by the life of Jesus Christ. Bottom line, a Christian's life should be different from the life of a person who is not a Christian.

But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's really hard to be different. When you're at school, it's hard to be different from your classmates. When you're at work, it's hard to be different from those with whom you work, and when you're at home, it's hard to be different from the people who live around you. Yes, it's so hard to be different because everything in us tempts us to be just like the people around us, even when we know they are doing things that would not be pleasing to God.

Yes, we want to be just like everybody else. We want to do what everybody else is doing. We want to wear what everybody else is wearing. We want to listen to the music everybody else listens to. In fact, sometimes we'll do crazy things just so we can be like everybody else.

Believe it or not, I can remember being in the sixth grade. The most popular person in the sixth grade was this guy named Roger Fink. If Roger Fink wore a special pair of tennis shoes, we all had to get those tennis shoes. If Roger liked a song, we all liked that song. And if Roger got his hair cut in a special way, before long, all of us got our hair cut that way.

One day, when we were in the cafeteria, Roger got a Popsicle and put salt on it. He said the salt made the Popsicle taste really good. So what do you

think the rest of us did? We all put salt on our Popsicle, not for just one day but for over a week.

You know what? Those salted Popsicles tasted terrible. We all thought they tasted terrible, but none of us said anything and all of us kept putting salt on them as long as Roger did.

Now wasn't that crazy – putting salt on a Popsicle, just so we would be like everybody else? But that's what we did. You see, none of us wanted to be different. All of us want to be just like everybody else.

But God calls us to be different. Instead of being like Roger Fink or anybody else, God wants me to be like Jesus. God wants me to use the language Jesus would use. God wants me to treat other people like Jesus treated people. God wants me to let other people know that I'm a Christian and even invite them to church with me. Yes, God doesn't want me to be just like my friends. God wants me to be different. God wants me to be just like Jesus.

Today is a special day in our church. We call it "The Blessing of the Backpacks." Obviously, we are not really praying for backpacks. We are praying for the students who wear the backpacks. Boys and girls, we are praying for you, not just today, but throughout the whole year. We are asking God to give you a good year at school, and to keep you safe, healthy, and happy.

But you know what else? We are also asking God to give you courage. We are asking God to give you the courage to be different. Many of your classmates will do things that are not right. Some will use language that is not right. Some will treat people in ways that are not right. Some will cheat on their homework and want you to help them. Some may even use, drugs, tobacco, or alcohol and tell you that it's okay because everybody's doing it. Some may experiment with sex and tell you that it's okay to do so.

But the Bible tells us to act differently - to refrain from those things we know are wrong - to use language that honors God, to work at your school in a way that honors God, and to love people like Jesus loved people, even if nobody else loves these people.

Will it be easy to be different? Of course not! Being different is one of the hardest things in the world. But there are some things you can do that will make it a little easier to be different.

First, when you are tempted to do what you should not do, say a silent prayer. Ask Jesus to give you the courage to be brave and different. When you pray, Jesus will give you strength and courage.

But there's something else you can do. As you leave here today, each of you will be given a name tag for your backpack. It will look something like this: (hold up the name tag.) We are giving you the name tag for two reasons. First, the name tag will identify your backpack in case you lose it, but even

more importantly, when you see that name tag, we want you to remember that the people of our church are praying for you.

When you see that name tag, we want you to remember that you are special because you have given your life to Jesus Christ. You are special because Jesus loves you, and even when people try to get you to be just like everybody else, you can look at your name tag and remember that you're not just like everybody else. You are special because you are a follower of Jesus Christ.

If you've read about American History, you remember those ugly days when we brought slaves into our country to do our work. One wicked slave master bought several slaves to work on his cotton plantation and treated them terribly. He would yell at them and beat them for no reason at all. Whenever the slaves saw the slave master coming, they would cower back and bow their heads, showing how much they feared of him.

But one slave was different. One slave refused to let the evil slave master make him lower his head. Whenever the slave master came, he would stand tall and brave. When the evil slave master saw his courage, he beat him even harder, but the man would always stand tall and brave, no matter what the master did to him.

One day, the evil master pulled him aside and said. "When I beat the other slaves they bow their heads and cower down before me, but you show no

fear. When I beat you, you continue to stand tall and brave. Why are you so different?

The slave looked the master straight in the eye and said, "I'm not just different. I'm special. You see, when I lived in Africa, I was the son of the king. When you captured me and brought me to the United States, you took away my freedom but you could not take away my birthright. In Africa, I was the son of a king, and in America, I still am a son of a king. Nothing you can do will ever take that away from me.

"You think I'm different, but I'm not just different, I'm special. I was special on the day I was born and I will be special until the day I die, and nothing you can do will ever take that away from me."

Today, I've been talking to about being different, about being different from the other people at work and at school. But I think I've been using the wrong word. Jesus doesn't just want you to be different. He wants you to realize how special you are. You're not simply somebody who acts differently. You're someone who is a special Child of God. Yes, you are special because you are the child of the King – and don't let anyone ever convince you to be anything less.