

READY TO SERVE  
I Corinthians 12

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In August, I'll lead a discussion based on this book, Faith After Doubt, by Brian McLaren. McLaren wants people to know that doubt is always a part of any real faith and that we shouldn't be afraid to ask questions. He knows that people are leaving the church and the Christian faith in record numbers, sometimes because they're led to believe that the moment they start questioning, they don't belong any more. He encourages us to remind one another that doubts and questions are welcome in a healthy church.

I absolutely love his definition of Christian community at its best: [It is]: **“a kind of belonging that isn't based on status, achievement, or gender, but instead is based on a deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions.”**

What would happen, I wonder, if we could fit all of that on the church sign in the front? Or on a huge banner everyone would see as they drove by? How many people would those words attract? How many people desperately need to believe that there's a place where they are welcome, where they're accepted, just as they are, where they're loved unconditionally.

Nate has written his own version of this welcome statement; it's on the wall of the Buoy Youth Center. Walk in the main entrance, turn left, and you'll see it. If you've

never read it, I hope you will. It speaks of this church's commitment, our youth group's commitment to extravagant welcome.

On this day that we commission our senior high serve local participants, I want to thank this church for your support of our youth ministry program. There is nothing more gratifying than when we hear that one of the graduates of our youth ministry program is participating in mission projects in college and beyond. Seeds that you helped to plant here bear fruit.

Youth ministry is personal for me. Most of us can identify times in our lives that were spiritually significant, times when we felt the presence of God in a real and powerful way. I know that Nate would say that for him, it happened at church camp. I'm guessing that Beau would say that for him, it happened on a mission trip. It happened for me in senior high youth group, as part of a community that was accepting, affirming and non-judgmental. Our youth group met on Sunday nights. Those Sunday nights changed my life.

My deepest hope for our Serve Local participants this coming week is that the experience is transformational, life-changing, for at least one participant. I pray that something happens this week that will replay on at least one person's highlight reel forever.

"Do not be conformed to this world," the Apostle Paul writes, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Paul is asking us to be open to transformational experiences.

A couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine was observing that many people she knows have made changes to their lives over the past 15 months. One friend quit her

job, one friend bought an RV, one friend moved. I am interested in the **internal** changes that people have decided to make. Given more time for introspection, some people reflected on their lives and chose to change some things about themselves. One person said to me, “I have decided to stop holding onto grudges, to be more forgiving, to repair some relationships that were broken.”

“Do not be **conformed** to **this** world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your mind.”

The musician John Legend received an honorary degree from Duke University this spring and delivered the commencement address. He said this to the new graduates: “...over the past year, you were forced to pause, to see yourselves not just in **competition** with one another, but in **community** with each other. Anyone getting sick was a risk to everyone. We all had to slow down, social distance, cover our faces, stop filling our days with maximum productivity and simply keep each other safe, keep each other alive, care for one another. And this perspective you gained will serve us all, because while that competitive drive that got you here can be an incredible gift, it can get in the way, too.”

He concluded by saying, “Love should be your north star. Let it guide you. Once we recognize our interdependence, our mutuality, it’s clear that love is precisely what our society needs.”

Our scripture for today includes these words, “Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family.”

What I received from my high school youth group was a **feeling**, the feeling that God loved me unconditionally, the feeling that I was accepted. When I got to college and took my first religion course, I began learning about that love by reading philosophers and theologians. I began to understand God intellectually. My head and my heart came together, and the content of what I knew was this. God wants us to experience joy, meaning and purpose. It's what Jesus was describing when he said, "I came so that you may have life and have it more abundantly."

Joy, meaning and purpose are the goals; they are the endpoint. The way you get there is through a life of serving others. I don't know anyone who achieves a meaningful life without service. What's really fun about the way God has created our lives is this. You don't have to wait to experience the joy. It's not like a grand prize that you achieve after so many years of service. Serving others brings joy. You experience joy along the way. And it's contagious. That's why so many of the students who participate in our mission trips here in junior and senior high go on to participate in service projects in college, and beyond. They don't do it out of guilt or obligation. Sure, they want to help others, but they also want the joy that service brings.

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul shows a savvy understanding of human nature. He gives us two wise pieces of advice about how we can become true servant leaders. The first is this: "Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think." In other words, be humble. **Practice humility**. Humility doesn't mean putting yourself down. It doesn't mean that you don't love yourself or take care of yourself. A healthy attitude of humility is a person who knows both her worth and her faults. She knows that she is beloved and valuable in God's sight AND that she has room to grow.

The second piece of advice is similar; it has to do with our attitude towards others. Paul gives this in the form of a metaphor. The Christian community, he says, is like the physical body. Every part of the body is needed in order for the whole to function. Each person brings a unique set of gifts and talents, a unique story and perspective. Each one of us is needed and equally valuable. We need the loud cheerleader and we need the quiet thinker. We need the person who can give generous amounts of financial support and we need the person who makes phone calls to those who are lonely. We need the kitchen crew and we need the landscape crew. There's no looking down on anyone, and there are no pedestals for anyone either.

As we seek to become servant leaders, to form and develop our character, our model is Jesus. No one embodied healthy humility better. He cared for himself admirably, always taking the time he needed to nurture his own spirit, yet he never called attention to himself, he wanted no accolades, he never bragged. If he were speaking today's language, I wonder if his motto would have been, "It's not about me."

And he showed immense respect for all people, for the lowliest, the most sick, for the children, for his political enemies...he treated each person with dignity, he listened to them, spent time with them, learned their stories.

The closer we come to following him, the closer we will be to creating a community where "belonging isn't based on status, achievement, or gender, but instead is based on a deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions." May it be so.