

## Be Transformed

I'm praising God for the moonwalk this morning.

Not like the moon landing - I mean Michael Jackson's moonwalk.

My whole family loves to dance. My wife and I both love dancing, Annabelle has even recently started wiggling around to music. And if you've been around Deacon when music is on, you know that kid can boogie.

Since he loves music so much - I've been trying to teach him about some epic moments in music history lately - and I showed him some videos of Michael Jackson at various points in his career.

Now Deacon's new trick is to say, "Dance like Michael Jack!" and then he'll slowly walk backwards or turn around and go "hee hee" - he even throws in a little kick every now and then!

I'm praising God for this (1) because it's just fun, but (2) because it's also a reminder to me that God has made us all unique - and this love of music and dancing is something special he gave to my family. It's God's joy expressed in our lives in a unique way.

But I also know that we need to cherish that gift wisely. Dancing can be fun just to be fun, but there's also ways it can turn inappropriate. So I have the joy and responsibility to teach my son how to love the good and avoid the bad.

That's the beauty of life with Jesus, y'know. Sin has distorted so much of what is good in this world. One response is just to reject all that can lead us into temptation. But if you go too far down that road, you won't ever be able to do anything. Jesus has offered us another way - not of legalistic rejection, but of transformation and redemption.

Because the Son of God came to live among us, die for us, and be raised to life again - we now have the ability to find redemption and resurrection life in the midst of a broken world!

This morning, we're continuing on in a series on the BASICS of the Christian journey with a reflection upon what it means to live differently in the world - to be saved that we might TRULY LIVE.

The Apostle Paul describes this well in Romans 12:1 when he says:

### READING

Romans 12:<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Paul had just spent several chapters explaining to the Roman church the mystery of God opening up the way for non-Jews to come to faith even as the Jewish people - God's chosen since Abraham - were rejecting their Messiah en masse.

And Paul says, this is the great mystery - some people's hearts are hardened, and yet God manages to use that to display His mercy to all.

So he says, THEREFORE - BECAUSE OF GOD'S GREAT MERCY - live differently than others.

Our greatest act of worship is to live a life that is weird.

I don't mean being different just for the sake of being different. But we're different - weird - strange - because our motivating values aren't supposed to be set by the world around us but by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within us.

Now, I had some thoughts I originally planned on sharing this week about what it looks like for us practically to be transformed by the renewing of our minds - but in prayer and conversation with some others, I felt God leading us in a different direction this morning.

We're still going to explore some scripture this morning, but we're going to read OURSELVES as well.

Our leadership on official board is prayerfully working through some questions as we dream and pray about our direction for ministry in the future. You'll actually hear a bit more about that next week as we plan on finding some ways to include the rest of the congregation in that conversation.

But before we even began that conversation, I wanted us to have a clear sense of who we ARE. What are our anchoring values that define us as a community and guide us in our decision making.

The Apostle Paul has a great metaphor when he talks to the church in Corinth and calls them a LIVING LETTER - written on hearts, known and read by everyone.

If WE were a living letter, what would it say?

So in order to do some intentional reflection, I had some folks at our All Volunteers Lunch a few weeks back do an exercise together. We had about 50 people present, and everyone got a sheet with a bunch of words on it - 365 words, one for each day of the year. I had folks choose 5 words out of that list that they felt described our congregation.

From there, I was able to take that list of words people offered and look for some patterns: What words came up frequently. What words meant similar things to the others.

As I prayerfully worked through that process, there were 5 key values that emerged.

I'd like to walk through each of these values to tease out what exactly it means for us:

- how we see it in scripture and how we see ourselves living it out practically.
- And going a step further, we'll look at both the unique blessings these values offer our congregation,
- but also the traps we can fall into when we're unhealthy.
- Finally, what do we do with that information?

The first value that emerged from our list was what I'm calling:

#### I. BELOVED COMMUNITY (1 Jn 4:19; Gal 6:10)

Our congregation deeply values relationships. In many ways we really do view those in the church as extended family.

SCRIPTURE: Two verses describe this well for us: 1 John 4:19 - "We love because Christ first loved us." and Galatians 6:10 - "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

I suspect that many congregations could claim this about themselves - especially somewhat smaller congregations - but we really do take seriously the call to love one another as adopted brothers and sisters in God's family. I suppose that's good since we call ourselves Brethren!

ILLUSTRATION: Lydia and I, from the very first time we came up here for an interview, just immediately felt like family with you all. And I don't think that's just because I was interviewing here. I've talked to countless others who attest to the same experience of immediate welcome and love.

PRO: The strength this offers to us as a congregation is that we really do long to love each other well and we naturally welcome in others with ease.

CON: The shadow side of this, however, is that we can really be deeply wounded when people leave, or when relationships suffer.

In some ways even that is a positive, because it proves how much we care, but when we carry that pain with an inability to cope, grieve, and move forward, we risk damaging our ability to heal and grow.

SO WHAT? No matter what our future holds, we know that we ought to keep prioritizing relationships. We want to live and operate in such a way that we can promote healthy relationships with one another. We probably would have difficulty if we all of a sudden had a massive influx of people, because we want so badly to know one another well. We would have to be very intentional about finding meaningful ways for people to connect in community with one another. You may not know everyone in the church, but everyone ought to be known.

Our second value builds off the first:

## II. SELFLESS SERVICE (Mt 6:3-4)

We exercise a willing and sacrificial generosity - particularly of our time and energy. And we do so without desire of award or celebration.

SCRIPTURE: We really live out Jesus' teaching in Mt 6:3-4 "When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

ILLUSTRATION: You know I've actually had 1 or 2 people get a little angry with me because I called them out in front of the congregation to give them a shout out and a thank you. They said, "I didn't want people to know I did that!"

We have people in this congregation who without hesitation will give of their time and energy to help people however they can.

We're not a congregation of extremely wealthy folks or excellent financial stewards. But of the gifts we have, we give freely and abundantly.

PRO: One of the obvious strengths this offers us is the ability to help others in some very creative and profound ways. This is why we can operate a Thrift Store - completely volunteer run - and give away all the proceeds to benefit other non-profits and ministries. As if that wasn't enough, we've got folks that will give up time at the drop of a hat to go and help someone with work around their house.

CON: The danger is that we can easily get burnt out trying to respond to all the needs and wants that pop up in our community. No matter how willing we are to serve, there always seem to be more things that we COULD do. And if we lack focus and healthy boundaries, we quickly get in way over our heads.

SO WHAT? We want to continue to lean into this value and encourage folks; and the best way to do this is to help each other by providing focus and protecting from burnout. We can't do everything, but if we can focus our energy well - this congregation has the ability to do a few things VERY well.

This next one is my personal favorite:

## III. RADIANT JOY (Ph 4:4)

We just love to laugh and have fun together. We know how to be serious when it's appropriate, but we also don't take ourselves TOO seriously.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 133:1 says "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." Philippians 4:4 - "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!"

That's not a command I feel the need to harp on much in our congregation. We know how to have fun together - to share in gratitude - and to just generally enjoy one another's' company. I can't think of a single gathering I've been to here that hasn't included laughter at some time or another. We like joy, and I think it's contagious.

ILLUSTRATION: I'll still remember talking to Lydia about a month or so after starting here and saying, "man, these people sure like to linger."

PRO: The strength this offers us is that we show the world how fun it is to live life with Christ. Being a Christian doesn't have to mean being stuffy or boring - we can genuinely enjoy life together in Christ, and that's compelling. It makes us more real and approachable.

CON: The downside here, though, is that we have to be careful about using humor in ways that actually poison relationships instead of build them.

It can be easy to use sarcasm or passive-aggressive humor to vent out your frustration in a really biting way, but then just claim, "Hey, it was just a joke - can't you take a joke?"

Even if it's not directly painful, we might use humor to try and play things off rather than actually dealing with things that matter to us.

SO WHAT? TWO THINGS: (1) We have GOT to keep space for fun. We need to maintain enough margin in our lives that we can linger and laugh together. (2) While we don't have to take ourselves too seriously, there will be times when we need to prod a bit deeper and be honest about the things that matter to us.

This might be helped by the next value that emerged in our list:

#### IV. AUTHENTIC FAITH (Jn 8:31-32)

This combines a few different streams of thought. Quite a few people offered words that had to do with faith, truth, belief, conviction, bravery, maturity, and so forth. What's really true of us is that we're a people that cares deeply about what we believe, why we believe it, and that the things we believe actually make a difference for our lives.

SCRIPTURE: There's a lot of scripture I could go to for this, but I think Jesus' words in John 8:31-32 say it well, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

How many people do you know that have really been wounded by the church. There are so many people out there that just hate hypocrisy in the church - and I don't blame them. Who likes a hypocrite?

But in this church, I'm pleasantly surprised by the number of people who really seek to live out their faith in an honest and authentic way. We're not a group that tries to put on a show or be something that we're not. We just want to follow Jesus together.

PRO: This emphasis on authenticity is something that our world is desperately craving right now.

CON: The danger we face here is that when we're unhealthy, we can sometimes slip into a way of operating in which it seems like there's little grace for doubt. I don't necessarily mean that toward others - I think we generally do a good job of extending grace to other people while they are working through doubt.

But we sometimes apply a different measure to ourselves. We're our own worst critics. And when we feel like we're not measuring up somehow in our faith, it's like everything is falling apart.

SO WHAT? We ought to cherish this value by continuing to create a safe and welcoming environment where people can be themselves and seek Jesus honestly - holding in tension faith and doubt.

We want to model authentic faith in both our successes and failures - both our faithfulness AND our moments of confession and repentance.

Finally, the last value that came out of our reflections is:

#### V. RUGGED CONTENTMENT (Ph 4:12-13)

We're a people of resilience and perseverance that produces gratitude in every circumstance.

Our congregation has been through some stuff. And for those of us who have stuck around, we've learned what it looks like to survive through trial while maintaining a degree of trust and optimism about the future. That's not common.

It would be very easy for some to experience the things we have and emerge with a whole lot of bitterness and resentment. We've experienced church splits, broken relationships, and even a traumatic embezzlement case...and rightly so each of those came with their own sets of pain and wounding.

...and yet somehow we've managed to come through it all maintaining a sense of calm, trust, generosity, and even an openness to reach out and partner with other churches. We haven't shut down and we haven't shut people out - even when we may have been tempted at times.

We learned from mistakes and made better policies where necessary. And we remain hopeful for the future.

SCRIPTURE: This value is the epitome of Paul's declaration in Philippians 4:12-13, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Him who gives me strength."

PRO: The great advantage that this offers us is the quiet confidence that says "we've been through tough times before, and God will bring us through whatever else may come."

CON: The negative side of this kind of contentment is that we can get so complacent in the midst of trial that we fail to take the action steps that can actually help us move forward. We may have a silent hope and trust that things will hopefully get better, but we find ourselves incapable of dreaming big dreams for the future and stepping out in ways to make that vision a reality.

SO WHAT? As we've seen, this sort of resilience and contentment is a biblical trait of God's people, and yet - just like all the rest of the values we've mentioned - we can live into it in either healthy or unhealthy ways.

If we want to lean into health in this value, we'll prioritize simplicity and clarity so that we can live and give freely. Let's let go of the stuff we don't need, and be content with what we have so that we can have open eyes, hearts, and hands to receive what God has to give us in the future.

## CONCLUSION

God's fingerprints are all over our congregation. Jesus established the Church universal, and there are common values for the entire family of God. But we also bear unique marks because of the specific set of experiences we have walked through together with our God.

We are a people of BELOVED COMMUNITY, SELFLESS SERVICE, RADIANT JOY, AUTHENTIC FAITH, and RUGGED CONTENTMENT.

These values are CORE to who we are because of the unique people who are a part of this congregation and the unique personalities that have had an impact on us over the years, in both large and small ways.

The same thing is true of each of us individually in different ways. We all have qualities we were born with and experiences that have shaped us profoundly throughout our lives.

Here's the kicker - just because God gave us these values and shaped them in us, doesn't mean they will always be expressed in healthy or even godly ways.

The world we live in is broken, and sin and evil poses a risk of distorting God's image within us into something very different.

- Love for our faith community can very quickly devolve into cliquishness.
- Generosity can quickly morph into people pleasing.

- Joy can slide into gluttony and flippant attitudes.
- Faithfulness can become legalism.
- Contentment can lazily change into disinterest.

DON'T LET THE WORLD DISTORT GOD'S IMAGE IN YOU. BE TRANSFORMED.

The only way to guard against this is by constantly humbling ourselves before God for the renewing of our minds.

- Searching and studying the scriptures to remind us of God's redemptive work.
- Practicing gratitude and reflecting on the Holy Spirit's work in our lives today.
- Speaking our praises and testimonies out loud together so that we can all be built up further as we journey together toward Christlikeness.

May we discover and remember God's image within us. May we cherish the way He has created us and shaped us - and guard those values against corruption from the world.

May we be transformed by the renewing of our minds and spirits. And may we look everyday more and more like our beloved savior, to the glory of God and the fame of Jesus.

Would you pray with me?

## BENEDICTION

Read Romans 12:9-13 & 15:13