

KNOW YOURSELF

Romans 12:3–5

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Romans 12:3–5 (NIV)

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

We’re looking at the total theme of Romans 12. It’s easy to see that it falls into three different dimensions. The first two verses speak of our commitment to the Lord. And verses 3–8 speak of our uniqueness within the body of Christ. And verses 9-21 speak of universal attitudes and actions, which are to be a part of all behavior for Christians. First, your commitment to the Lord. Second, your unique individuality in the midst of a body. Third, the kinds of things which make up part of our actions and attitudes for every believer.

The fundamental assumption as we approach verse 3—following verses 1 and 2—the fundamental assumption is when you come to Christ, inevitably you must also come to the community or to the Body which He is gathering. Just as when you are born you are placed in a family; you have a mother and father. If you do not have some adult care and supervision—someone taking care of you when you are born—you’ll find you cannot exist. What is true of biological or human life is also true of spiritual life. There is no such thing within the kingdom of God as a lone ranger. We’ve been put into a fellowship.

It’s striking, even, to look at the gospels and find that when Jesus first began calling persons, His first two disciples were exactly that—they were two, not one. He did not call one, first of all, to follow Him. But rather He called two: Andrew and John. They became part of His company.

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Everyone thereafter whom He called was not only called to follow Jesus, but, inevitably, because they were called to Jesus, they were called to the company which He was gathering. Some of them may have preferred to omit some of the members of the company. “Lord, if You’ll just rearrange that person, then I’ll join Your band.” Can you see Matthew, the tax collector, coming in and there’s Peter, who had probably been obnoxious as he had paid the fish tax at Capernaum? Matthew might say, “Lord, I’m glad to follow You, but would You please rearrange this whole situation?” Or Simon the Zealot coming into the situation where there was Matthew the tax collector—the collaborator, the quisling, versus the revolutionary. But Christ, in the gathering of His own disciples, taught them that in coming to himself, inevitably they were going to be coming to one another. The Lord places us in community.

Therefore, a fundamental difference begins to arise when we talk about the “church” versus gathering together in an “audience.” Or when we talk about an “assembly” such as this, versus a “group” which may go to a dramatic production, or to a theater, or to a ballgame. An audience is satisfied to come to a place from its different locations, to sit and to watch the action that is going on in front of it—without having to have any relationship with the people who are near to them in the place where they are gathered—and then return. What is important is the action that has occurred on the stage or on the field. That’s an audience. But a church is a congregation where we come, not to watch the action on the stage, but to be a part of the action of what God is doing. When I was in Yugoslavia several months ago, one night we went off to see a soccer game. It is considered by many to be a sin to go to an athletic event, but, interestingly enough, not a sin to drink beer. They have things all reversed over there. But some of the believers felt this wrong. But we thought part of my experience of the Yugoslavian culture would be to see a soccer game. They were playing Romania. So four of us got together and went to the soccer game. As I thought back, we spent about three hours there and watched the action on the field. We had a

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good time among ourselves, but it really wasn't important who was in front of us, in back of us, beside of us. We made no attempt to strike up some sort of relationship with them. What was important was the soccer game.

I spent the same amount of time in a church. In that two- to three-hour period of time that we spent in that church, by the time that I got out of that place, I was really plugged in to those people and concerned about their life. Memories of their faces still come to me, and the kinds of experiences that they've been through.

The difference between the two was I am *at* the soccer game, but I am *in* the church. In. It's the difference of the preposition you use. If you are saying you are going *to* church, I think you're not saying it quite scripturally. You are *in* the church, and you are going to where the church meets.

We are members together, Paul is saying, one of another. So we've got to face that—in spite of the fact that, in our culture, people like to disappear into their loneliness. They like to be anonymous. The church is not a society of anonymous, faceless persons who get together to hear a preacher now and then. The fellowship of the people are in relationship, first to the Lord, and then in relationship to one another. This is not a new concept which has just recently been discovered in the church—with the emphasis on growth groups, and encounter, and Bible studies, and the like. It's always been a part of the true and believing church.

I ran across the statement that John Wesley made several centuries ago. He said, "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve Him alone. You must, therefore, find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of a solitary religion."

Thus Paul, in verses 1 and 2 where he's talked about commitment to Christ and new life in Christ, immediately for the rest of this chapter turns to talking about our place and our responsibility in community in the Church.

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One poet has said, “To dwell above with saints we love, oh, that will be glory! But to live below with saints we know, well, that’s another story.”

In these three verses today, Paul speaks first of our sense of self-worth in verse 3. Then our sense of uniqueness in the body of Christ, verse 4. Then in verse 5, of the unity within that Body.

I. Verse 3: Our sense of self-worth.

“For by the grace given me I say to everyone of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you” (Romans 12:3, NIV)

There’s a play on words that Paul is using here in the Greek. One person has tried to translate it into the English this way: That “we are not to be high-minded above that which he ought to be minded, but to be so minded as to be safer-minded.” Four times, Paul is using that word “minded.” Not to be high-minded above which we ought to be minded but to be so minded as to be saner- or safer-minded. In this proper estimate of self-worth, which is the foundation of really belonging to Christian community—understanding who I am and what I have to contribute—Paul really is getting at two dangers, two extremes of the continuum. One is the sense that may arise of individuals within community to feel an exaggerated sense of self-worth. Then, the contrary to that, an underestimated sense of self-worth.

A. But, first of all, the danger of Christian community is there might be those within the Christian community who would have an exaggerated sense of self-worth. Like the popular teenager who woke up one morning and looked around and said, as he saw himself in the mirror, “I wonder what the other six wonders of the world are doing this morning.”

In Christian community, you can know whether or not you have an improper sense of self-worth, an exaggerated sense of self worth, if you can truly answer this question: Are you seeking to serve, or to be served? If you are seeking to be served, always coming with it is a sense of

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exaggerated self-importance. Or if we're asking, "How can I shine?" rather than, "How can I serve?" it is another indication of improper self-exaggeration.

I recall 3 John 9, where he speaks of a member of the Christian community there who likes to put himself first. That matter of putting yourself first—of going to the head of the table, to think of a word that the Lord used in regard to behavior in circles where people want honor—is the same kind of thing that is a manifestation of Satan's basic problem. He was not satisfied with his own sense of self-worth, but sought to make himself as God. As one person has said, "If God could not endure in heaven a proud angel, you can be sure that He will not endure a proud preacher either." Nor will He endure someone who is seeking to disrupt Christian community by playing a role that is more important, more exaggerated, than they ought.

One of my favorite stories is the story of "Yurtle the Turtle" by Dr. Seuss. One of my favorite stories. He's on the island of Salamasand, and he's king of a pond. Seuss says, "His throne is a stone." He looks about, and he's king of all that he sees. But alas, he's not king of enough. So he calls for a nine-turtle stack, and poor Mac is at the bottom of the stack. Nine turtles go up, and Yurtle gets on top and he's looking around. And he says he's king of a cow, and a mule, and a house, and a blueberry bush. And he's all excited that he's gotten to be somebody. Poor old Mac, down at the bottom, is beginning to creak and groan by the weight that's put upon him. Then Yurtle looks out, and he sees that there's stuff that's still higher than him. So he says, "Pile on more turtles." About two hundred. And coming from all over the pond are the turtles swimming and crawling up over poor Mac and getting to the top. At last, Yurtle the turtle gets on top. And he says, now, that he's king of the trees, king of the birds, king of the bees, king of the butterflies, king of the air. He rules from the clouds. He's king over land, over sea. He's real happy till the sun goes down and the moon begins to rise. And he sees that the moon is higher than him. So he calls for 5,607 turtles. About that time, Seuss says, poor Mac did a very turtle

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thing. He gave a burp. And Yurtle the turtle landed back in the pond of Salamasand, and now he's only king of the mud.

I think seeing this manifestation of behavior—what happens when people get an exaggerated sense of self-importance, not only do they hurt themselves, but they hurt other people in Christian community. Because, inevitably, they must step on other people to get where they are going, and dislodge persons from doing their rightful task within Christian community. The energy has to be diverted from serving the Body to serving the person who has an exaggerated sense of ego.

Psalm 131:1 means a lot to me. It comes from a framework of reference in my own life where I once heard a person, when I was in college, say that all he wanted to be was a school teacher and a husband and father and live a happy life. I thought, “I want to be king of the world!” I had a lot of ambition when I was in college. Over the years, I've thought of Joe's statement—how he just wanted an ordinary life—and I began to realize as I've gotten just a few miles on me that the New Testament, by and large, was written to ordinary people who, in their ordinary pursuits of life, had become extraordinary in personality and devotion in life. God is calling very, very few within any Christian community to do something great in the Kingdom. It's to be ordinary, but to live an extraordinary quality of life in the midst of that ordinariness. So Psalm 131:1 really speaks. The psalmist is realizing, after he's clutched for so much and tried to get so high, he's finally come to himself. He says, “Oh, Lord. My heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.” Beautiful words, practical advice.

Paul exhorts against this exaggerated sense of self-worth by the phrase “by the grace given to me” (Romans 12:3). This is an important phrase because the grace which is given to Paul is the grace of being an apostle. If you will, he was at the top of the ladder in terms of what position he

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can occupy in the Christian Church. If we are drawing a line diagram of the organization of the Christian Church, from apostolic times till now, then Paul would be up there as an apostle. He has that chief position. He recognizes the importance of that position. But it is not a position that he has striven for. It is a position which has been given to him by grace. He calls, therefore, on the basis of this statement “by grace.”

Other believers, to follow their function within the Body, recognize that we do not occupy that function by self-attainment. Whatever God has called us to do, ultimately it can be traced to the grace of God which has put us there and allowed us to have that security in the role.

B. On the one hand, doing away with an over-exaggerated sense of self-worth. On the other hand, doing away with an under-exaggerated sense of self-worth. The person who feels worthless is like the person who feels like he’s everything. There’s a quality that’s common to both types of personality—that is, both are absorbed in self. Both are not absorbed in serving others. Therefore, the person who has an underestimated sense of self-worth often feels negative and inadequate because they just don’t feel up to the task, or just don’t feel that God has given them anything worthwhile.

Someone has said, “When the Lord was making me and passing out noses, I thought he said, ‘roses,’ so I asked for a great, big, red one!” I think, at various times, if you’re normal, you struggle with both dimensions—an over-exaggerated sense of self-worth at times where something has happened and you feel threatened because of it, and other times, out of a deep sense of inferiority, you have not felt adequate to do what God has called you to do.

This has certainly been the situation with me. I proceeded all my life from a deep sense of inferiority, feeling like the first day I went to college, I was just sure that I wouldn’t make it. I was surprised a year later to look around and see that I was still there. When I finished college, coming out to California, I was just sure when I got to seminary that would wash me out. After

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all, I came from an unaccredited liberal arts college in Springfield, Missouri, and my roommate was from the University of Pittsburgh. I was going to school with guys that came from UCLA, and USC, and Yale, and Harvard, and other, smaller places. I thought to myself, “I’ll never make it in this place. I’ll flunk out. I know it. I know it.” An underestimated sense of self-worth.

The Lord doesn’t want us to be on either side of the spectrum. He wants us to think of ourselves with sober judgment. And the word “sober judgment” is really one word in the original. It’s the same kind of word that is used in the gospels to describe the Gadarene demoniac, the guy who was crazy and demon-possessed. When he’s healed, the townspeople come and find this person sitting, clothed, and in his right mind. “Right mind” is the same word that is used here for “sober judgment.” It’s reasonable and sound and serious—a person who is keeping their head.

So what Paul is saying in regards to a proper sense of self-worth is, “Keep your head and look around and discover the measure of faith that God has given to you.” That’s also a part of verse 3. God has given to each one in Christian community a measure of faith for some special task. In verses 6,7, and 8 he will more develop that. If you don’t know what measure of faith God has given to you, I hope by the time we’re through with Romans 12, you’ll be able to walk away and say, “I know now what it is. I know that measure of faith God has given to me.” The Scripture is clearly teaching that when you’re called to be a Christian, when you’re put in Christian community, God has given you something—a measure of faith whereby you’re to contribute to the ministry within the community and contribute, therefore, to the ministry of the Lord. It’s a measure of faith. What task has God given you to do—what specialty that belongs to you? That is your measure of faith.

I know what it is for me. I can’t say what it is for you. I began to know what it was for me when I was ten years of age. It was a measure of faith for preaching, strange as that may seem. I like to preach. It’s a measure of faith that God has given to me. When I was ten years of age, I

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remember distinctly God’s call on my life to be a minister. In the little church in which I was in we had what was called a C.A. group, a youth group. It was so small that the younger kids could come in. I was 10 years of age, and I got to come into the big youth group—an honor upon honors. My dad, who happened to be pastor, rigged it so that I could act on this call. They had me bring the sermon one night in the youth group. I worked hard on that all week long, Psalm 23. I wrote everything down. Every word carefully penned. I stood up, and I remember being frightened out of my teeth. Never did I look at the audience one time. I just read my ten-minute message. But it was a measure of faith, a basic desire. As I acted up on it, God began to put into principle this thing—that to him who has, more will be given. That is, use what God has given to you in that measure of faith, and it will develop into a broader sphere. You’ve got to use the measure of faith God has given you. If the seed is going to grow, it must be planted.

In my years as a paper boy, throwing the paper on the streets of Springfield, I couldn’t wait to come to open fields because that was the time I could preach like Billy Graham—and carefully look around and see if anybody was coming so I could immediately tone down and go back to my normal self. A measure of faith. Practicing and exercising it.

This measure of faith is God’s gift to you as a believer. Something that goes along with your personality, something that fits you—a gift of grace, and it is to be developed by you. Therefore, it’s both God’s work, and it’s your work. Each of us, someone has said, will have as much ministry as we desire and as much as we’re capable of containing. The walls of our heart are elastic, and desire expands them.

So Paul is saying, “In Christian community, have a proper sense of self worth.” Know who you are and what God has called you to do within community. As I said, when we look especially at verses 6–8 in succeeding weeks, if you don’t know what this is, I really believe it will come into focus during that time.

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II. The second thing Paul is saying to us in this passage is, “Have an appreciation of your uniqueness (verse 4).”

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function...” (Romans 12:4, NIV). Not all have the same function. As you look at the various lists of gifts in the New Testament letters, you find that this is the case. Some have classified the gifts as falling into three spheres. There are the ministry gifts—apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher, bishop, and the like. Others have found a list of gifts, the charismatic gifts of 1 Corinthians 12, which have to do with knowledge, and wisdom, and faith, and miracles, and healing, and tongues, and prophecy, and the like. Some have found (and I kind of like this terminology) a third division of gifts here—although I realize there’s a great deal of overlapping—called motivational gifts, which have to do with what Paul is speaking of in verses 6–8. Gifts which help motivate the Body towards its proper service to one another and to the Lord. Therefore, we have things like prophecy, and service, and teaching, and exhorting, and contributing, and leadership, and acts of mercy, and the like.

But in each of these spheres—ministry gifts, charismatic gifts, and also motivational gifts—we find that not all the gifts in any area have been given to any one person. But rather, there is to be a plurality of these expressions of ministry within the Body itself so that the full Body may come together and totally express all that the Lord wants for it.

I read of a youth minister who, in illustrating this passage, took a football and painted it into a great big eye. He took the thing, wrapped it in a blanket, took it to the youth group and said, “This is my baby.” Of course, they saw what was there—the football painted like an eye. The kids said, “How gross!” And it would be. If a baby were all one member—an eye—it would be gross.

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We're not all to have the same function. Part of our trouble in the Christian community is that sometimes we see someone who has what is a very attractive ministry and we say, "I wish I had that!" Forgetting our uniqueness, we want to be someone else. The Lord says, "Nothing doing! You're unique. What you've got, only you can offer, and each member of the Body is important."

Paul will go on in verses 6–8 to develop this theme of diversity. I want to borrow an illustration I heard someone else use in regards to the seven motivational gifts spoken of in verses 6–8 to describe how—if God has given you a measure of faith for a particular area—you might approach honing in on that.

Suppose that you're at a family dinner table and as you're sitting there eating, the youngest child has just managed to drop their dessert—chocolate pudding—on the floor. We want to see how the various measures of faith and talent and assignments of ministry in the Christian community are now going to come into focus.

The person who has the motivational gift of prophecy (probably the dad) will say, "Son, that's what happens when you're not careful!" And his motivation for saying that is, like prophecy, seeking to correct. It seeks to distinguish between right and wrong. "How many times have I told you, 'Do not set the thing so close to the edge of the table? And don't reach for the glass and let your arm go over the dessert.'" The ministry of prophecy is to correct.

But the mother is sitting there and has the ministry of service. She says, "Let me help you clean it up!" Her motivation is to render practical assistance that will fulfill a need. When that happens, what is your first response—prophecy or service?

Someone who is a teacher in the group will say, "I know why that fell. It was too heavy on one side." The motivation of a teacher is to discover what happens, and to remedy it in the future.

The teacher is looking for the lesson to be learned.

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The person with exhortation says, “Let’s try to do better in the future.” That’s exhortation. The motivation is to inspire and to encourage.

The contributor is sitting there and he says, “I’ll be happy to buy a new dessert.” His motivation is to meet a tangible need.

The person who is bent toward mercy will say, “Don’t feel badly. It can be happy to anybody.” The motivation is to empathize, avoid embarrassment. He’s keenly aware of feelings.

And the person who has the gift of leadership—he who gives aid, the administrator, the facilitator—is sitting there and says, “Get the mop. Help me fix some more dessert.” The administrator is getting it all organized.

There is tremendous diversity within the family in this regard. The Church is like that. There’s diversities of ministries, and Paul is saying, “Don’t try to be somebody else in the body of Christ. Be what God has called you to be.”

I have a favorite illustration in the Book of Acts in this regard. One of them is the ministry of Peter’s shadow. You recall that as the apostles were doing signs and wonders in the early stages of the Book of Acts, one of them went ahead of all the rest. Peter’s influence got so fantastic that his shadow began falling on people, and at just the presence of his shadow, people were getting cured of demon possession and illnesses and all kinds of things. I got to thinking. Those other apostles could have been tempted at that point. “Look what’s happened to Peter. We lay our hands on people. His shadow lays on them, and look what happens to them. We’re going to leave off what we’re doing until God gives us the Shadow Ministry.”

We see this sometimes in charismatic circles. God gave Kathryn Kuhlman the gift of laying hands on people, and under the Spirit they would fall down. Then you begin to see perversions of the gift. People saying, “My ministry won’t be quite as powerful if I don’t have that.” They lay their hands on people, and they don’t quite go down.

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Can you imagine someone coming along to Dorcas in Acts 9? She was the widow who made coats and garments. They say, “Dorcas, you really should be in our Bible study group. It meets five days a week from two to five every afternoon.”

Dorcas says, “I’ve got these coats I’m making for people that are in need.”

“But you can’t really be spiritual, Dorcas, until you’ve met with us. Then, in your spare time, then maybe make coats.”

God didn’t call everyone to do the long, meditative kind of group experience. God called some workers in this regard. So Dorcas had her unique ministry. She would have been violating her call in the Body if she tried to imitate someone else.

So Paul is very simply saying, “Once you know yourself and have a proper estimation of your self-worth, thank God for your individuality within Christian community.” God hasn’t called you to be like anybody else. In fact, I’m convinced that the more truly you are being what God has called you to be, the more truly you’re being like Jesus Christ. And the more truly, therefore, the whole body is fitting together the way the Lord wants it.

III. The third thing that Paul says in this passage is take regard for our sense of unity in the Body.

We realize that we are uniquely-gifted by the Lord. But there’s an additional thing to that. Even though we are many, we are one body in Christ and, individually, members of one another. Here Paul speaks of our sense of belonging, our sense of unity to the Body where we come together.

We are a Body.

I’m not sure the apostle Paul would have made these kinds of analogies, but maybe they’re legitimate because he used the figure of the Body. The various parts of my body are not connected to each other. My toes are really not connected to my fingers. But there is something that connects them all, including nerves, and the blood system, and the like. Especially—to focus

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in on the blood for just a moment—the same blood that flows down to my toes also comes up to my fingers. The blood has the power to be in all parts of my life. If I could press that analogy in regard to Christian community, one of the vital elements that connects us together in the body of Christ is the blood of Christ—which is the foundation—which reaches all the elements within the Body. We're built upon the blood of Christ. The Spirit which is in me also reaches out to these various parts of me, contributing to the harmony of the whole.

My hand does not say when it is looking at my dish of food, "I need a calorie intake to keep these five fingers going. So I refuse to let go to the mouth anything that's more because that's all I need." If the hand began thinking like that, the rest of the body would die fairly quickly. There is an animating principle of each member thinking of the good of the whole. And, therefore, contributing not from the standpoint of what's good for me, but what is good for everyone.

Although our functions differ in the body of Christ, we all come from the same cell, the originating, starting place of life. This is the kind of uniqueness about the body. A body is not formed by putting together various parts. I defy you to make a functioning body by doing that. You can't do it. A body is formed by the extension of the one original cell. Within that one original cell is the potential of the working of every aspect of the body. Within the one individual cell is the color key for my keys and hair. Within the one original cell is the genetic makeup that will produce my hands, and my feet, and my ears, and my nose, and my eyes. It's all in the original cell.

And so with Christ, all of the gifts of ministry, all of the gifts of motivation, all of the gifts which He wants in the Church are present first within Christ. They are there. They are meant to flower and develop as the Body extends through Christ. So we are all to be parts of one another because we come from the same Source. Christ our Lord has put us in His body, and is developing us out

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of himself, that the whole body might grow up into the fullness of Christ—what the Lord wants it to be—and be so beautiful that it fills the heavens and the earth.

So what is the Lord saying to you through this Scripture? He is saying, “Accept your worth to the Body. Your self-esteem is connected to your relationship with other saints. Not an over-exaggerated, not an under-exaggerated, sense of worth. But accept your worth. God has called you to something within His body, within the Body of the Church.

And secondly, accept your task in the Body. What is it that God has put within you? If you don’t know it, we’ll try to help you discover it.

Thirdly, accept and be a part of the Body itself. God has not called you to live in isolation. We need one another. Therefore, God has put us together in this church.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we just pause for a moment and think of the difference between a sick body and a well body. A sick body needs to be ministered to. It needs an awful lot of time by experts and specialists. It just requires a recuperative period, when it doesn’t have the strength to get out and do the tasks that can be done by a healthy, normal body. We think, Lord, of how a healthy body can function—how it can work and run and praise and just really get along.

We want, under You, to be that healthy Body. Not a sick Body in this community or in this world that You’ve called us to, but a healthy Body. We’re thankful that You’ve bought the living cells which are an extension of Your original work. You’ve put us here, and we thank You for the health that is in our midst. We know it’s for a purpose, that we can strive to inspire one another to serve You better, to inspire one another to good works, and to be a collective light for You in this community. When we see that function that You have for the Body, then each of us wants to be the best we can be in the unique role in which You have called us. Lord, we just pray for ourselves in this moment. I pray that I would be the best person, by the guidance of Your

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Spirit and the enablement of Your power, doing the best that I can do in the gifts which You've called me. Lord, I pray that for each person here. That You will awaken in us as never before a sense of our belonging to each other and a sense of our uniqueness and how we can contribute to one another, to really be what You want us to be. We ask this in Your Name. Amen.