



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Into the Future

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

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The scripture for today is Paul writing to the church in Rome. It was a time when the world worshiped anything and everything, like today's world. Remember, when Paul wrote his letter, there weren't any church buildings. There weren't any organ committees, choirs, VBS's, or stewardship cells. There weren't any elderly Christians who were baptized as babies in the church. It was all new, and it was growing. Sometimes I think he was writing to a church that looked more like the youth ministry than what we've come to think of "church." Listen for ways that Paul calls us to apply our faith.

NIV Romans 12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship. 2 Do not conform any longer 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... 9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Before coming to Dexter, I was a youth minister for 13 years. With apologies to Robert Fulghum, everything I really needed to know, I learned in youth group:

- Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship.
- When it comes to kissing, there's a big difference between "peaches" and "alfalfa."
- The minute rowdy becomes obnoxious, you have to stop.
- Whatever happens, pretend that it's working. (Especially on mission trips)
- No put downs!
- Parents, if you wait until Sunday to decide whether you will go to church, you've lost the battle.
- When you or your kid gets in trouble, it's very difficult to "fall back" on a youth group you haven't been there for.
- Slip-n-slides are the best way to get Jello off of your body.

- Don't put the list of what to bring to the retreat on the back of the return registration form.
- Parents, we make our kids brush their teeth every day and never worry about whether they'll reject it when they get older.
- If you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself first, then you can do whatever you want!
- Don't be afraid to be labeled a Jesus Freak.
- Even all the alternative kids look alike.
- We're the church. If we don't talk about Jesus, who will?
- At church, always buy whatever the youth are selling.
- Always remember: God's crazy about you.
- Any idiot can put people down. It takes real character to build them up.
- Anybody can love their friends. Try something really cool, and love your enemies.
- You can be tough on kids if they know that you love them.
- They don't care how much you know, till they know how much you care.
- And remember, the church is always only one generation away from extinction.

I love confirmation/graduation. This is an important time for you. You are (graduating or confirming your faith) before the church body. What an awesome time. It's exciting. It's another step toward independence. Graduation: Upon the completion of your studies, upon satisfying the course of study requirements, you receive a thrill: that wonderful time of reward called "commencement."

What a time! Pomp and Circumstance, trumpets, gifts, family and friends; (the exchange of money!). And when you earn higher degrees, the faculty are decked out in their full regalia, robes of royal colors, processing in (men can wear dresses without anybody thinking it's wrong). And of course you'll have to endure the "commencement address." Some important person from sports, television or industry is called upon to address the graduating class.

In many of the commencements I've witnessed, I've noticed a common theme. Commencement can easily begin a life of deception. You see, *we are regularly lied to in commencement addresses.* At some point the dignitary will look out over the class and say something like this: "You are the future! You are the hope for tomorrow! Our future is in your hands!"

The first few times I heard that as a student, I was flattered and thought it might be true. But after having heard it so many times, I've realized it's utter deceit—a total lie. I hate to tell you this, and forgive me for not flattering you on your special day, but **you are not the future!** You are not even the hope for tomorrow! Maybe you didn't expect to come today and be told that, but it's true. From the perspective of the Christian Gospel, it is not right to think that we are the future or that we are the hope for tomorrow, because we're not. Nowhere in the Bible are we ever told we are the future, let alone the hope for tomorrow. If you believe that, look out, because you are starting out on a journey that does not know God. That journey is desperately searching for the hope of the future. It pins it on you, or technology, or "new" ideas, or the new and improved. But it's a lie. Have you noticed ads for TV shows each week? "You can't live without this one! This next episode is it!" Everything has to be new and improved because people are afraid of the future. So they think they have to do it "my way."

Everywhere you go you hear the message: "Think for yourself. Be an individual! Be unique!" And the majority of people say: "Yeah, let's do that. Let's all think for ourselves. Okay. How about you? Yeah, me too! Let's think for ourselves

together...What are *you* going to think about?...Okay. Me too!" In every generation it's repeated again and again. Everybody thinks *they're* ushering in the future. Everyone thinks they're unique, new and improved.

Do you see the deceptive character of the commencement address that begins with the line "You're a unique individual who can think for yourself and create a unique future by your own hands"? Church, it is simply not true! Don't believe it. The future is *not* in our hands! We are *not* the hope for tomorrow. You and I are *not* the future.

But in youth group, something strange happened. I heard something I didn't hear anywhere else. I learned that the future has a name. And the name of the future is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, Son of God. God incarnate (in the flesh). We don't have to live in the delusion that we are the future. Jesus Christ is our future! No matter what job you may have in life—whether you are a businessman, businesswoman, teacher, researcher, a mom, a medical professional, a missionary, a builder, or pastor, Jesus Christ is your future, and you are called to follow him. It's that simple. Don't buy into the lie. Don't go for the lesser dream. Your greatest adventure in life is following Jesus.

In youth group, I learned that following Jesus is not some spiritual mumbo jumbo that makes no difference. You don't follow Jesus "because you might die tonight!" You follow Jesus because you probably *won't* die tonight, and you'll need to live—really live—tomorrow. That's what He can give you when you give Him your all. Giving 95% commitment of yourself to Christ is 5% short. Why give less to the one who gave his all and his best to you? God is looking for the brightest and the best. That's you! When we choose to join him we do it God's way. *I* can't engineer it. The future is not mine to create. The future is God's. We simply respond. The question is "How are we to serve that ministry?" Look again at what Paul said...

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it." Our scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

Notice he doesn't say "It's really easy." The truth is, it's tough work, because where ever you go, there you are. The biggest problems don't even come from other people. They come from you. But remember, you're *not* the future, so relax. Break away from that other massive message that says "We are the future". Tell them to get a grip. Jesus is offering you your future his way. In church and in youth group we offer Jesus and try to live it out by following his way. Settle for nothing less for your life. It's the kind of thing you probably won't hear anywhere else, even in commencement addresses.

Cardinal Suhardt challenged me when he said "The task of your Christian life is to *live in such a way* that your life would not make sense if the Gospel you proclaim were not true." That's your future, so let's get going. Let's keep going, and let's do it! Amen!