

On the screen as the message begins -- Romans 12:2 - *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.*

Have you seen the new Family Y on Belair Road? It is beautiful. Somewhere I read that there are 6,000 members of the Marshall Family Y. That's just one branch. Their mission for every member is to build a healthy mind, body and spirit. I don't know what the square footage is at the Family Y, but I know all 6,000 members can't be there at once. I've noticed, in fact, that there is never a wait. When you go in, you don't have to wait in line to exercise. There are always plenty of open machines. Even with 6,000 members. That tells me there are a lot more members at the Family Y than users. Remember that.

Anyone can get a membership at the Family Y. You don't have to be in shape or pass any kind of fitness test. Anyone is welcome. Of course, if you're not much of a gym person, it can be a little intimidating when you first walk in. There are dozens of machines all lined up, and all the people on those machines seem to know exactly what they are doing. I think you never feel so out of shape as the first day at a gym. You're just trying to keep your balance and not cry, and everyone else in there looks like they are training for the Olympics.

Maybe the most amazing thing in the new Y is the treadmill. This is not your mother's treadmill. It has its own television! If you bring your earphones, you can plug in and watch TV while you're walking *and call that exercise!* I'm not a TV person but to me, that's brilliant. It makes it kind of hard to get beyond the treadmill, to be honest. They don't have TVs attached to the barbells. I'm guessing it would be easy to get hooked on the treadmill, especially the channel-surfer part of it, and never do anything else. Remember that, too.

At one corner of the room with all the treadmills and step machines, there are two tables with a coffee bar and a free newspaper. I've noticed that no matter what time of day it is, there is always someone sitting at that table reading the paper, drinking coffee. And frankly, I don't know how they do it. I don't know how they sit calmly in the same room with all these people who are running and pumping and sweating. And these coffee people look to me like they are just there for the coffee machine. I don't notice that they've exercised. So I guess you can join the Family Y and show up every day for your free cup of coffee and sit at a table and read the paper and say you've been to the gym. I mean, technically, you're right. But ... *really?*

So here's my point. What happens at the Y, happens at church. A lot more people join than get involved. And I'm thinking that the first time you walk in here ... if you haven't been to church in a while ... it could be a little intimidating. Everyone else seems to already know the secret handshake and how the songs go and where the coffee is. And feeling intimidated, it might be easy to gravitate to the one thing that feels comfortable ... and never get around to the rest of it. I'm thinking that in church, a person could do the fitness club equivalent of putting on head phones and moving your legs without ever actually going anywhere. I guess you could even come in here for the free coffee without ever engaging in the mission of the church.

This is why Paul felt like he had to say it out loud ... that if you're going to follow Jesus, it means going someplace spiritually. He says (Romans 12:2) - *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 is saying that to be spiritually at the level of testing and knowing God's will, we've got to do more than just conform to the lowest common denominator. The call is not to conformity but to transformation.

So I'm in a class at the Y right now, and our leader person told us last week that it's all about strengthening our core. She likes to work on our core, and the first day we did that I could hardly keep up and the next day I was so sore. In fact, I went in and told the leader person that I'm not sure I even have a core. I mean, I'm pretty sure you have to have a core to strengthen it and I don't think I have one. I have *sore* ... not core.

This is what transformation means to Paul, the guy who wrote Romans. He's talking about the kind of life change that stretches us. Not just a few behavior changes but transformation at our very core. Paul would say that transformation *probably* doesn't happen by coming in and drinking the free coffee ... even if ... technically ... we could call that going to church. Because if nothing's happening inside ... at the core level ... if there's no development of spiritual muscle ... then *is* it transformation? Jesus promised abundant life. Why do we settle for less?

Let's take the Family Y a step further. What if we all join the gym, then get so attached to the building that over time we begin to believe that exercise can only happen in that building? That walking paths are not real exercise ... that swimming or hiking or biking or just rolling on the floor with the dog doesn't count as fulfilling the mission of the Family Y, which is to build healthy minds, bodies and spirits. Wouldn't it be a shame if we lost all those organic approaches to fitness because we got so attached to a building that we couldn't imagine exercise happening anywhere else?

And ... what if we decided all spiritual formation has to happen here? That meeting at Starbucks to talk about Jesus or gathering in homes to share life together doesn't count because it isn't at the church? What if we got so dependent on the guy or girl up front that we lost our

ability to exercise our *own* spirits? Or what if we thought it was only about Bible study, and forgot that our spirits are also exercised when we worship or learn about financial fitness or physical fitness or relationship fitness?

Jesus promised abundant life! Why do we settle for less?

Here's what I think. I really think that as a society we've gotten hooked on the *event* and we've forgotten about the *encounter*. We go to a church service but we never meet Jesus.

Meanwhile, every one of us ... and I'm certain of this ... is being called right now into an encounter with the Great I AM. With the Creator of the Universe who loves us. I'm not talking about church here. I'm talking about an encounter with Jesus, with this cosmic being who is so much bigger than us and who for some incalculable reason loves us and wants a relationship with us. Just like we are. And this encounter is not an event ... it is not even a destination. It is the beginning of a journey.

Jesus was once talking with his disciples about what heaven will look like and you definitely get the sense from the conversation that maybe the disciples are a little more focused on the "then" of the kingdom than the "now" of it. So to bring heaven into the present tense, Jesus says (John 14:6-7) - *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you really know me, (If you have really encountered me) you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.* Jesus is trying to get his disciples to see that Jesus is everything the Father wants us to see about Himself ... that the one they are following is God. There is no moment when Jesus suddenly pulls God out of a hat. This is God they are following.

I think about the Israelites who were delivered from slavery in Egypt. After they left Egypt they ended up out in the desert for years, looking for their spiritual home. They navigated the desert by following two manifestations of God ... a fire at night and a cloud by day that would go before them and lead the way. What's so interesting about their story is that they had God right there in their midst in this pretty spectacular way ... and they were following him. But they were always so busy looking after their own comfort or looking for a destination that somehow they never really encountered the God they followed. I mean, it is supposed to be in the following that God is revealed to us ... but I guess we only see Him if we are looking for *Him* ... not some event or some answer to our own agenda.

The disciples had the same issue. There they were ... following Jesus but missing God. (John 14:8-10) - *Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." 9 Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.*

I think there are so many people sitting in churches this morning ... so focused on the event that they are missing out on an encounter with God. And I can just hear Jesus saying to them, "Don't you know me, even after I have been with you for such a long time?" And all the while, they are sitting there waiting for someone to show them something.

Another time, Jesus was walking along the side of a pool. A lot of people believed this pool was anointed, that when it stirred the first one in would get healed. So Jesus is walking down by this pool and (John 5:5-9a) - *One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 6*

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" (I'm pretty sure that's the way he asked it ... "Do you even want to get well?") 7 "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." 8 Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." 9 At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

I read this story as a lesson from Jesus in getting on with it. Either we want to get well or we don't. Maybe we like sitting poolside. Maybe we'd rather lean on our excuses than just get on with it. Maybe we like the free coffee, but actually ... that's not an encounter with God. Here's the thing: If we want to get well ... if we even want to be spiritually healthy ... it isn't someone else's job to get us down into the pool. Ultimately we are responsible for our own spiritual journey. What I hear Jesus saying in this story is, "I am right here! Do you want an encounter or not? Do you want to be healed or not? Do you want to grow or not?"

Here's what I see. The spiritual life is not membership in a club but an encounter with the living God ... the creator of the universe. It is an encounter and a journey. The very last thing Matthew wrote about Jesus ... the thing Matthew must have thought was so important that he wanted it to be the last thing we read from him ... was what we now call the Great Commission. Matthew says that after the resurrection, before the ascension, Jesus came to the disciples and said (Matthew 28:18-20) - *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

So there it is: If we make disciples, Jesus promises to with us. The charge is to *go*. To follow Jesus out into the world and search out the ones who don't get it and show them Jesus. And here's the punchline: the first disciple we'll ever make is us.

I want to ask you to take out that little booklet you got in your worship flier today. Write your name on the front. Open it to the inside and let's look at this together.

You will notice that across the top of the page you see two words in big print: searchers and seekers. So the left side of this flier describes those who would still classify themselves as searching spiritually. And the right side describes those who feel like they are now following Jesus.

Beneath the pictures, there are seven categories. The far left ... "not interested" ... describes someone who is aware of the spiritual world or of religion but not really interested. This person may have a negative view of Christianity ... maybe based on misconceptions. One who is curiously seeking is a little closer to experiencing faith. This person knows about Jesus, but doesn't really like the idea of God telling him what to do with his life. And yet he know there must be more to life than he has already experienced. In general a seeker's life isn't working the way it is set up now. That person may be ready to look at the options.

One who is searching assertively is ready to give God a chance, to explore the claims Jesus made and see if there is any validity to them. This person may be ready to begin expressing her real feelings and questions to God, and identify the biggest obstacle keeping her from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the center of the page are those who are ready to make that faith leap. These are the folks who realize they are powerless to achieve God's forgiveness on their own. They have accepted that Jesus is God and are ready to give him access to their life.

So do you see that these categories are like a spectrum, with the "not interested" people on one end and the "living missionally" folks on the other? People who find themselves on the right side of the page ... experiencing new life, growing in community, living missionally ... these folks are experiencing God and are in various stages of growing in faith and in how they follow Jesus. Where are you on this page? Take a moment to read through these bullet points and see if you can identify ... in general ... the category that best describes your life is right now.

Now, before we go further I want to ask you to put the flier down for a moment and listen. I believe God is calling us as a community of faith to do a new thing. I've seen some incredible fruit in this place in the last year. Because of your faithfulness in giving, we are in a position to step up and purchase this building in six months. I think that's something we should be spiritually prepared for. Because I think it would be really easy ... in the midst of buying a building ... to slip into that lie that the spiritual life is a destination, not a journey. Somehow, we need to stay focused on the journey.

Next week, you're going to receive our fall list of small groups. This is probably the best list of groups and leaders we've ever had. God is doing some pretty amazing things among our leaders. I'm seeing a level of health and maturity I haven't seen before. This church has great leaders. I'm seeing spiritual fruit ... people getting saved and healed and released. And I think these next six months are crucial to our future. So my question for you right now is this: ***how do you want to be part of that?*** Because we can only go where God is taking us if each of us

steps up and takes responsibility for our spiritual health. I can't make your journey for you. The leaders of this church can't carry it for you. It's an every-person journey. God is calling each one of us to an encounter ... to a journey ... maybe to something deeper than you've ever experienced. And we can offer the groups and the ministry opportunities but how you respond to that call is *your* responsibility.

They tell me that the best way to get fit is to get a goal. We do better when we know the journey is taking us somewhere. So *where would you like to be on your spiritual journey six months from now? What is standing between you and that point? What will it take for you to move beyond the barriers that are keeping you from achieving your spiritual goals?*

Those questions are on the back of your booklet. I want to invite you to take time with those questions right now. Wrestle with them in prayer ... write down your first thoughts ... then we're going to pray over them together. I know this. Jesus wants your heart. He wants an encounter with you. He wants to take you on a journey. How are you going to respond to that?

To our online audience: if you'd like a copy of the "Spiritual Journey" booklet mentioned in this message, drop us an email with your contact information and we'll gladly send it to you.