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## *Youth Sunday Sermon by Leo Culp*

### **A sermon by Leo Culp Youth Sunday**

I'm Leo. I go to North Atlanta High School and I'm a senior there. I want to talk to you all about unconditional joy and unconditional love.

The Gospel tells us that if we keep God's commands and remain in his love, we will reach this level of complete joy. And he's telling us how to do that. He's telling us how to maintain joy, how to find joy, and how to ultimately spread joy.

"Now remain in my love," he says. How do we remain in the love of Christ and the love of God, and how does this lead to joy?

So my story in this church and my story of searching for the joy I'm talking about, it's about progression. I say progression because I've been going to this church since around sixth grade and during that time I've gone from trying to attend Bible study nearly every single Tuesday, being on youth leadership team, and eventually helping to teach confirmation.

Now, in between these parish activities, the experiences I've been the most humbled by have been those in the diocese. When the gospel was discussing this idea of loving each other unconditionally, I don't think that I could understand the magnitude of this love had it not been for the Old Dining Hall at Camp Mikell, where probably the most important chapter of my life began.

This chapter was marked by experiences at Happening, a retreat in North Georgia organized by high schoolers for high schoolers. It is built on this unconditional love and joy that was discussed in the gospel today, and honestly I have no idea where I would be without it.

So, this is what a Sunday morning is like Happening; at least this is what my first Sunday morning at Happening was like. I remember we got woken up extremely loudly at six in the morning. The only thing I could really feel or the only thing I can remember is that slight stickiness of a sweat that comes from a restless night of sleep. And I remember walking down this gigantic hill and really having no idea where I was. I remember walking into this room sitting down with a group of my peers, and really just only thinking about how awesome a shower would feel.

I sat down and I heard my name called. I rose and I walked to the center of the corridor that divided our group in half. A girl with kind eyes dropped a wooden cross around my neck, and then she hugged me, which I was not expecting. I returned to my place in the crowd and for some reason, I felt happy. I have no idea why. It was the earliest I've been up since I was about eight years old, but I was I was happy. Because of experiences like this, the love of Christ was instilled in me and that cross I referenced hangs on my neck every single day to remind me of that fact.

I went into my life after that weekend and I made changes to my attitude and how I went about my days. I changed how I carried myself and how I saw myself and how I saw others. You see, after that little progression from my home here at the Cathedral, I made a home at Camp Mikell in Toccoa, Georgia. And because of that literal progression, I made a progression within myself.

I want to graduate from servant to friend, like the gospel says, and I was ready to make that jump. One of the most humbling experiences of my life was actually getting to lead one of these weekends and be rector, almost exactly two years after my extreme naivety that Sunday morning. That had to be the most amazing weekend of my life to date.

I've said the word *progression* a lot this morning, but I in no way can describe the ways that my peers progressed in their faith throughout that weekend. They treated each new hour differently and showed me a new meaning of the phrase, "Love each other as I have loved you." A lot of times, the youth can be looked down on in the real world for being naive or even ignorant. However, I would say that because of their relatively new and unchanged minds, they can show the true meaning of love through Christ better than maybe anyone else. They can show the true meaning of unconditional love in a way that can seem foreign to some adults.

For the youth here today, I ask that you attend one of these weekends. If you can't tell from what I've told you today, it's truly, truly life-changing. And for the adults, I ask the same. I had multiple adults come up to me during my weekend as rector who just had completely dumbfounded expressions on their face at the love and attitude of the youth that were there.

And after reading the gospel in preparation for this, I could see why they were amazed. These high schoolers, these teenagers, acted way beyond their years, showing the unconditional joy and love referenced in the gospel towards people they had never met in their lives. They embodied how we should not just love in the Episcopal community, but in the community at large as well. They showed that participation in the love of Christ extends beyond the walls of a church or chapel, and they showed the true message of the gospel today.

These high-schoolers progressed from servants to friends so early into their lives, and showed the true purpose of love and joy brought by God in the process. By chasing the feelings and experiences of these youth, I feel confident that each and every one of you can help foster fellowship outside of this building, and know of this complete joy and love that God is calling us to know.

Amen.