We Were Made to Thrive

*Ratatouille*

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Genesis 1:26-28; Romans 12:1-21

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At the recent Leadership Summit, we heard a speaker share that creativity is taking two known things and putting them together in a new way. That is what Brad Bird has done in the movie *Ratatouille*. He puts a rat, in the kitchen with a human friend, with the ability to become the best chef in Paris. This movie is all about creativity, and like every good story, *Ratatouille* explores identity, community, and purpose. These themes are important to us because we, too, are writing stories every moment of every day of our lives. So let’s watch the first clip and meet some of the main characters.

*Ratatouille* is about food—what it is, how you think about it, what you do with it. Food is the source of life. Food *is* life. And this movie is really about who you are and how you approach life—how you choose to live.

This first clip introduces us to the main character, Remy, and his family. Unlike other rats, Remy walks on two feet, reads books, watches TV, and likes to cook. He has a great sense of smell and taste that enables him to appreciate and enjoy good food. He wants to be more like humans who discover and create rather than take.

Remy’s father is the leader of the rat clan. He follows the traditional path of a rat eating garbage that nobody wants because “food is fuel.” In other words, you eat to survive. He believes humans are dangerous and to be avoided. Remy’s brother Emile believes Remy has a gift, but he is sticking with the family tradition.
Remy captures a new vision for food and life by watching a TV program with renowned chef Gusteau, who has written *Anybody Can Cook*. This is more than a cookbook; it is a philosophy of life. It is possible not merely to survive but to be fully alive. Gusteau says, “You must be imaginative, strong-hearted. You must try things that may not work, and you must not let anyone define your limits because of where you come from. Your only limit is your soul. What I say is true—anyone can cook...but only the fearless can be great.”

Gusteau lifts up the value of people and the vision for living as artists with passion, joy, and friendship. This connects with what we read in our sacred book: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (Genesis 1:26-28).

St. Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” We are created in the image of God. This is our identity. And we are made for community—to live in relationships with God and others. And we have been given a purpose—to
be creative and do meaningful work for God’s glory and the good of the world.

Reggie Joiner, who wrote the book *Think Orange*, has said, “Every kid is made in the image of God with a divine capacity to reason, improve, lead, care, relate, and trust, to believe, to imagine, and even to love.”

Recent events have revealed that many do not share this view. In a world filled with hate and prejudice, we are to embrace and live God’s truth: no matter the color, class, culture, country, or circumstances of life, every person is to be given love, value, dignity, and respect because they are made in the image of God.

Let’s go back to the movie. Remy becomes separated from his family as they are forced to flee for their lives from their rural home, and so he finds himself in Paris at Gusteau’s restaurant. The next clip is a promotional video that gives us a sense of Remy’s great adventure.

This clip introduces us to the human characters who are engaged in a rat race. The rat race is any exhausting, unremitting, and usually competitive activity or routine, especially a pressured urban working life spent trying to get ahead with little time left for leisure, contemplation, etc. Sound familiar? Each character illustrates the way different people approach life or engage in the rat race.

Alfredo Linguine’s aim is simply to get by. He is human, but like Remy, he lands in Paris and is separated from his family. But unlike Remy, he doesn’t have a passion or purpose. He pretends to cook, but doesn’t really know how. As you saw
in the clip, he and Remy are able to do together what neither of them can do on their own—cook. Together they can become the greatest chefs in Paris!

Collette is the only woman character in the movie. She has worked long and hard to vie for her place and to make it to where she is in a man’s world by proving she is the toughest person in the kitchen. Over time, she softens and lets down her guard because she has nothing to prove to Linguine. He listens to her, learns from her, and values her for the person and chef that she is. She tells him, “We are artists, painters, more than cooks…. You are one of us now.”

Chef Skinner is a person with fierce, even distorted drive. He is the picture of ambition and greed gone amok as he looks out for Number One. He doesn’t care about cooking or the quality of food. He plans to use the restaurant for his selfish financial gain. He’ll do whatever it takes to get rich.

My favorite character is food critic Anton Ego. As his name suggests, he is full of himself and believes his role is to analyze and criticize because he does not believe anyone can cook. His office is shaped like a coffin with the colors of red and black and his typewriter is shaped like a skull. He looks and acts like a bloodsucking, death-inducing vampire. He kills with his criticism. One of his earlier reviews crushed Gusteau, leading to his early death from a broken heart.
These approaches depict the way of the world, and we are all tempted to succumb to the rat race, but we are made for more. We are meant to discover our true identity in community with others and live with meaning and purpose. What does it look like to be fully alive?

In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul lays out the problem of human sin, salvation in Jesus Christ, and sanctification or transformation by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 12, he lays out the vision of how we are to live and what it means to thrive. I love how it is stated in The Message: “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” (Romans 12:1).

In other words, your life and my life are not our own. Every moment of every day and every breath we take is God’s gift to us. Our gift to God is how we live this life. Whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, God longs for each of us to be fully alive as we offer all that we are and all that we have to Him for His glory.

But this is not easy because we are prone to drift into the rat race and the worldly ways of living. So the passage goes on to say: “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” (Romans 12:2).
The world will try to steal away from us the life God intended us to enjoy. We are not to be conformed to the world but transformed into the image of Christ. We are called to live intentionally as the unique persons God has made us to be by growing in maturity and using our best gifts and abilities for the glory of God. What does that actually look like?

One of my favorite scenes in the movie is when Remy first gets to Paris and finds himself in the kitchen. I love this scene of Remy cooking. Even though he is in danger of being discovered and caught by humans, he simply has to cook. He is compelled to fix this soup and make it delicious. He knows what to do and how to do it, so he does. He is using his gift of smell and taste and focusing it on his passion of cooking. This scene depicts beautifully a life that thrives. It is like a dance that delights and dazzles in giving the best that you are in a way that brings joy, enthusiasm, and energy.

I like the way Frederick Beuchner puts it: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” That is what it means to thrive.

Each of us is given a unique SHAPE, for a unique purpose. Our spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality, and experiences impact who we are and what we do. It is our responsibility to discover, develop, and deploy our gifts and abilities in service to God. At the bottom of your bulletin you will see a link to an assessment online that can assist you in
discovering your spiritual gifts, but it is often in simply experimenting with different ministries that we discover our SHAPE!

Recently, I was talking to Sally Mitchell about these ideas and the movie *Ratatouille*, so I have asked her to share her experience.

*Sally Mitchell’s Minute for Witness:*

I love Ratatouille. Not the dish—that Pixar Rat who cooks. I first met Ratatouille my last semester of grad school, at the ripe old age of 56. One professor made a unique assignment: watch the movie *Ratatouille* and consider your future career and your passion. Write about it, then present it to the class.

Many of those students were young and had obviously not given much thought about feeling passionate about their futures. They stared blankly at each other. Fill in the blank, she directed: I feel happiest and the most like me when I am (BLANK).” I didn’t hesitate. I wrote: I feel happiest and the most like ME when I am…WRITING. I felt the truth of that statement in my heart. I knew my passion. But here I am, too many years later, STILL NOT writing.

I just attend my fourth Global Leadership Summit—a conference of diverse Christian leaders. Summit founder and pastor Bill Hybels spoke about the importance of passion in our vocations. That through awareness and prayer, God can write a story for us that is so much better than any story we humans could have scripted.

My own script has been altered since I first met that rat Ratatouille. God shaped me through my participation in the Growing Your Soul experience for the past several years—a
journey that moved me in the second half of my life to a
deeper knowing of God and a deeper knowing of myself.
The Great Banquet renewal weekend was another soul-
shaper. I am shocked that it took me ten years of invitations
to accept. Great Banquet and its community continue to
transform me in my faith.

Recently, Renewing Prayer helped me release some
emotional pain and transform it through Christ’s love. As the
saying goes, pain that is not transformed is transmitted. I get
that now. This year I became a Stephen Minister. Already,
God’s story for me has been profoundly impacted by this
experience that helps others find peace and love where life
may have brought pain.

So, while I haven’t been writing, I haven’t been doing
nothing. Encountering God through scripture, solitude, self-
examination and discernment—God continues to write my
story. He was shaping my script, loosely titled, Sally The
Writer. After four years on staff at VPC, I resigned my
position as Grapevine’s manager. I am sad to go—but I am
ready for the next act of my story’s script.

What about your script? Are you a rat who loves to cook?
Are you an old retired grandma who thinks she can write?
What are you doing that makes you feel alive? Makes you
happiest? God knows.

Another Summit
speaker, performance
researcher and author
Marcus Buckingham,
believes that “the purpose
of work is doing what
you love with the things
you are blessed.”
What talents has God blessed you with? What is the story that God is writing on your heart? I know that I love writing—I hope you don’t because I don’t need the competition. But I know that God is ready to help you write your script and it will be better than anything you could have scripted alone.

**Back to the sermon:**

Sally’s witness highlights that each of us is writing a story with our lives, and we are called to live according to our SHAPE. We will be most effective and fulfilled in life and ministry when we use our spiritual gifts and abilities in the area of our heart’s desire and in a way that best expresses our personality and experiences. And I love that she mentioned so many different communities and ministries that God has used in her life to bring about transformation and to help her to discover her SHAPE for ministry. We discover, learn, grow, and serve best in community. We accomplish more together than we can on our own.

This is illustrated in the movie. On the night that Anton Ego is to visit the restaurant, the cooks and wait-staff walk out after discovering that a rat is cooking in the kitchen. Collette and Linguine are the only ones who remain, but Remy still needs more help. So his dad and brother and the rest of the rat clan pitch in. It’s creepy to see so many rats working in the kitchen, even if they have been run through the dishwasher. But it makes a point. Remy is a great chef, but it takes a community to prepare and serve guests great meals in a restaurant.

The work of a kitchen is a good picture of the church, the body of Christ at work. No single person can do all that needs to be done alone. Romans 12 goes on to say, “In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each of
us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't” (Romans 12:4-6, The Message).

We need to work together to do what needs to be done to serve and bless the world. Life is to be lived in community in such a way that the world can witness the abundant life Jesus has given us—a life of love, joy, and peace.

Remy decides that he will serve Anton Ego a simple, traditional French meal. Ratatouille, a blend of many vegetables and spices that makes a flavorful, colorful, beautiful and delicious meal. But ratatouille is not just the meal they make together. It is the symbol of what they are together—a beautiful blend of individuals bringing their best and truest selves together with others to become something to be offered in service to others.

When Anton Ego takes a bite of the ratatouille, he is transported back to his childhood home and the meal that his mother made him. Suddenly, with one bite, the color comes into his face, his eyes light up, and he drops his pen symbolizing that he has died to being a critic and been raised to a new and different kind of life. The old is gone and the new has come.
After everyone has left the restaurant, Ego learns that Remy is the chef and that all of his rat family and friends have helped to cook the meal. The next day, they all wait to discover what he writes in his review:

In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face, is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so.

But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends. Last night, I experienced something new: an extraordinary meal from a singularly unexpected source. To say that both the meal and its maker have challenged my preconceptions about fine cooking is a gross understatement. They have rocked me to my core. In the past, I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau’s famous motto, "Anyone can cook." But I realize, only now do I truly understand what he meant. Not everyone can become a great artist; but a great artist can come from anywhere. It is difficult to imagine more humble origins than those of the genius now cooking at Gusteau’s, who is, in this critic's opinion, nothing less than the finest chef in France. I will be returning to Gusteau’s soon, hungry for more.

Anton has let go of his ego, revealing a spirit of humility in recognizing greatness of someone from very humble origins. He is hungry not only for more food, but more joy, more relationships, more life as it was meant to be lived. While his reputation as a food critic is destroyed, he has a new identity, community, and purpose. He becomes a business investor and partner in a new restaurant called La
Ratatouille with Remy and Collette as the chefs and Linguine as the headwaiter. Even the rats act like humans sitting at tables on a patio on top of the restaurant enjoying good food, having conversation, and telling stories.

La Ratatouille is the place where people and rats thrive as they bring their best gifts and abilities together with others to live, create, and literally serve others good food.

This is our calling, too: to be individuals who bring the best of who we are and live in community with others to love the Lord and love the people, serve the Lord and serve the people. We were made to thrive. The movie depicts in story form what Romans 12:9-21 says in written form:

“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” (Romans 12:9-21, The Message).

These are good words for us to think about, meditate on, even memorize so that they sink deep into our hearts and souls so we can actually live them in our everyday, ordinary lives. We were made to thrive, but it will take vision, intention, and a willingness to give ourselves over to practices, relationships, and experience that God can use to help us become the people He wants us to be so that we can thrive. Whatever we do and however we spend our days, now is the time for each one of us to reflect and to ask ourselves: Am I living a life that thrives? Am I living according to my SHAPE in community in order to bless others? In other words, Am I becoming like Christ together for the world?

As fall begins, I encourage each of us to take time to consider how we will cultivate our relationship with God and others in the weeks ahead. Please take time to explore connect and service opportunities listed in the bulletin and in our monthly newsletter so that you can make the most of what God has in store for us individually and as a church. Let’s not get caught up in the rat race. Let’s live as those fully alive, committed to the person of Christ, the body of Christ, and the work of Christ in the world. Because we were made to thrive.