

August 23, Ordinary 21A (Romans 12:1–8)

I wish Paul also exhorted us not to think too *poorly* of ourselves.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue

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I left our vestry meeting with a to-do list as long as my arm: drafting the letter to donors, creating a new staff evaluation form, finding volunteers for an upcoming event. Walking my dog that afternoon, I stewed with resentment and complained to Tango that I was the only one doing anything. But as I followed his careful olfactory investigations of sage bushes, rocks, and patches of dirt, I had to admit that no one pushed those tasks onto me. I had offered to do everything I was now whining about. I had believed it was all mine.

I am a part-time pastor in a rural, mountain community. My congregation is full of capable and committed people. The year before COVID, their priest was on medical leave and the members ran the church, including its four weekly community meals. When the pandemic hit, the church's small food pantry grew by at least 500 percent and became the primary point of food access in our county; it now serves more than 1,900 people a month. This growth was driven by church and community members. The priest, unable to live at an altitude of 10,000 feet while she recovered, lived an hour and a half away. Eventually, she came to accept that she would not be able to return to Leadville, and the church was without a priest once again.

This is not a congregation that looks to the pastor to do everything. My taking on too much was not their fault.

I wish Paul's exhortation to not think too highly of oneself had a corollary of not thinking too poorly of oneself, either. I came to realize that I wasn't saying yes to too much because I thought no one else could do it. I was saying yes at least in part because I was trying to prove my worth. Serving in a radically new context from the Chicago suburbs from which I moved, in a denomination that was not my own, and in the looming shadow of the beloved former priest, I felt off balance and out of place. I wanted them to love me. Failing that, I would settle for love's stepsister, them depending on me.

Paul's partial list of gifts that make up the body of Christ is about more than efficiency or divvying out church tasks effectively. It's about mutuality and interdependence. God has set things up so that we must rely on each other. It's hard to ask for help, but a go-it-alone independence has a cost. Arthur Brooks writes in *The Atlantic*, "An unwillingness or inability to accept kindnesses from others is a form of selfishness, because it appropriates for the giver all of the moral prestige of generosity while laying on the taker a sense of indebtedness, even obligation, that they have no way of paying off." When the hand says to the foot, "I have no need of you," both the hand and the foot are harmed.

At St. George, everyone has the dignity and agency and ability to give back to the community. At St. George, we create a culture of mutuality. We don't make hard-and-fast distinctions between givers and receivers. If you were to show up at St. George on a pantry day, you would see people carrying each other's babies, teenagers vacuuming the floor, someone setting down their box of food and cleaning out grease traps, and young adults carrying boxes for older adults. But you wouldn't know who had come primarily to volunteer and who had come primarily to get food. You can't tell the difference between givers and receivers, and you shouldn't try.

Recently, someone poked his head into the church office to say hello. He'd been gone for a while. A period of job insecurity had taken its emotional toll, and he'd fallen off the wagon. As he started to put his life back

together again, he came to St. George. He had come to get groceries and to volunteer. He needed to give. He shows up almost every day to unload deliveries, wash dishes, and keep the shelves in good order.

One December, I traveled to Tennessee when my mother was near death. I missed Christmas Eve. When I returned I was offered condolences on the death of my mother, and I heard what a special worship service they'd had. I was grateful. Brooks writes, "Generosity is like the circulation of the blood, healthiest and best when it goes around and around." My ongoing work is to figure out how to not get in the way of the healthy functioning of the body of Christ.