

JUST REMEMBER THIS

Notes at the Door (Part 5)

Good morning, Christ Church! I am grateful to be with you today and also confess that it feels a bit surreal. It seems like just a moment ago that this journey began. On January 21, **1997**, Amy and I got off an airplane from San Diego with Rush (age four) and Cole (ten months) and thought: "WOW! It's cold here!" Little did we know how much the people of Christ Church would take us in and warm us up... how they would help us welcome our third child, Reed, two years later... and how all of you would become the community in which our family would grow up and expand with the DeBoer clan improving us and our shared grandchild expected this spring. Now, this coming Tuesday -- twenty-eight years to the day we arrived -- we're following God's next call upon us and you, Christ Church, are beginning your next great adventure.

I remember venturing off to college when I was eighteen, feeling more than a little uncertain about what lay before me. Soon after I arrived, I went to a film society that was showing an old black-and-white masterpiece called, CASABLANCA. Any of you know it? It struck me as one of the greatest dramas and love stories I'd ever seen. And then there was its SONG. Wikipedia says that only one song -- *Over the Rainbow* -- ranks higher as a movie theme than the song from Casablanca. The lyrics go like this. "*You must remember this | A kiss is just a kiss, | a sigh is just a sigh. | The fundamental things apply | As time goes by.*"

There was something reassuring to me about those last lines when I was eighteen, going through a major change, and more than a bit uncertain about what lay ahead: ***The fundamental things apply as time goes by.*** What ARE the fundamental things, I wondered and may you wonder too? What are the dependable realities on which you and I can build our identity and ground our assurance as we travel through life? What are the fundamental things -- as valuable to the eight-year-old, as to the eighteen or the more than eighty-year-old? Let me post on your doorframe before I go just a few thoughts I have on that.

I don't know exactly how many babies I have baptized over my forty years as a pastor, nearly three-quarters here. I'm guessing maybe more than ten. What I do know, however, is what I've wanted those children to absorb like water soaking into thirsty pores. I want each of those kids to know: **YOU ARE LOVED.** I don't mean sentimentally, or occasionally, or conditionally, but absolutely. It's what I'm always trying to get across when I lift them in that Lion King move you've seen me do, or when I hold and kiss them and say, "Welcome to the family," or walk them around the congregation. I want them to feel in a life-defining way: YOU ARE LOVED.

We've got a lot of problems in our world today: poverty, pollution, and poisonous partisanship. We are often distracted from pursuing real wisdom or relationship by an

endless feed of images and entertainments. But as I've said this here many times and want to say one last time, I believe the greatest problem confronting humanity today is that ***we have forgotten with what a great love we have been loved.*** We have an over-supply of the Devil's shallow, always evaporating self-love – the kind that comes from splashing our faces with the likes and followership of people we are not sure WE even like or want to follow. But we need the kind of love that truly changes us.

If we knew when we were children being bullied on the playground that the people who tormented us were those who'd seldom experienced real love but WE had, I doubt we'd be as phased by their taunts. If we knew as teenagers that the awkwardness we were experiencing was only the chrysalis stage of a God who loved us so much that he'd designed a process that would strengthen us to fly, I think adolescence would be easier. If we knew that those people we hate or whose hungers we ignore are beloved by the same great heart that loves us, it might alter the way we related to them. If the diagnosis was cancer and we knew that on the other side of life's door was not in fact a brick wall or an empty darkness but a Love so good and so powerful that it could resurrect us to new life, maybe we wouldn't mourn death in quite the same way.

I think a lot of things would get better if we could be truly washed and immersed by a very great LOVE. And so, I'll tell you a secret. When I'm alone in my office signing the certificate of a child I have baptized, I jot down beneath my signature a citation from Scripture. I don't know if you can read it, but it says: **Ephesians 3:14-21**. Maybe it's overly optimistic but I'm hoping that long after the water is dry and I'm not there, that child's parents might read that scripture to their little one and resolve to help them in coming years to understand what it means. I'm hoping that maybe one day when that child is a middle schooler wondering about their worth... or a college student anxious about the future... or in old age feeling their faculties failing them... just maybe they'll stumble across that baptismal certificate, notice that handwritten citation, and open a neglected Bible. Perhaps they'll read the words of this passage I've cited on baptismal certificates more than a thousand times.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. In other words, even if you feel alone and forgotten at times (and all of us do), remember that you are part of a massive family spanning space and time. You have a Father whose love for you is SO GLORIOUS that he sent his son to die on a cross to demonstrate your worth to him. As my friend Victor says, when I really take that in, it is "knee-bending."

So whatever you face as you move into the future, ***I pray that out of his GLORIOUS riches GOD may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,... that you will let the love of Christ be the solid ground, the nourishing soil of your life. I pray that you ***may have power... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to******

KNOW this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of GOD... It's one of ***the fundamental things*** that will always apply and I hope I've somehow been able to help you soak it in. You are loved and love changes life.

There is a second fundamental thing that I want to impress upon you before I go and it is this: **TRUTH TRANSFORMS**. If you want to grow to your God-given potential or help your kids or friends do that, you need LOVE and you need TRUTH. As I say that, I want to also recognize that there's quite a lot of debate these days over how anyone determines what is true. On one level, I understand that. We've been lied to a lot. It's hard to find news that is not selective and slanted to push somebody's ideological agenda. Christians, I think, need to enter discussion about truth with humility and a listening ear. But that's different than saying there really is no objective truth.

In their best-seller, *The Day America Told The Truth*, the secular marketing firm of Patterson and Kim found that a stunning 93% of those surveyed declared, and I quote, "that they – and nobody else – determine what is and what isn't moral in their lives. They base their decisions on their own experience and daily [feelings]." Can you imagine applying this same open-mindedness to other spheres of life? How long would you continue to fly with an airline whose motto was *"Safety Standards are Fine for Those Who Are Uptight About It, But Our Engineers Aren't So Narrow"*? How excited would you be about going under the scalpel of a surgeon who told you: *"You know, I never bothered much with anatomy in Med school, since all medical truth is relative anyway"*? How long would you leave your child in a school where the chemistry teacher said to her, *"You're free to drink from either that container of H₂O or that beaker of H₂SO₄. After all, they're both clear liquids and we're only talking about a couple of molecules here or there, so imbibe whatever you prefer"*?

There is objective TRUTH behind the reliability of the Bible, the historicity of Jesus, and the resurrection of Christ. But the truth that matters every bit as much is what happens when somebody chooses to move beyond their own experience and daily feelings and **trust and obey** Jesus on the moral level. I think of the longshoreman who became a follow of Christ and began to share his faith with others along the waterfront. One guy asks him if he really believes all that stuff in the Bible. "I believe it from cover to cover," he said. "You even believe that stuff about changing water into wine?" The longshoreman had frankly never read that part of the Bible. He said, "I don't know about changing water into wine, but I know that in my house he's changed beer into furniture."

Jesus makes a very bold claim. He says: **I am the Way, the TRUTH, and the life (John 14:6)**. Do the things that I've instructed you to do and **you will KNOW the truth** – i.e. you'll experience the reliability of the way of life I've shown you – **and the truth will set you free** (John 8:31-32). In other words, following my teachings will be transformative for you.

When I first started following Jesus, I was often skeptical about this. There were a lot of things Jesus told me to do that disagreed with my experience or feelings. He said crazy things like: If you want to lead become a servant. If you want to be wealthy in the best way, give generously. If you seek to make a dent on your enemies, do good to them. Don't run away from mourning. Die to yourself and you'll become a greater self. But I tried these things and kept sticking with them. I know now that all of this is TRUE. It has transformed my life and in so many ways, set me free.

How about YOU? The beloved British author and intellectual, G.K. Chesterton, once said: *"The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting, but that it has been found difficult and left untried."* Christianity Today's editor-in-chief, Russell Moore, says something really provocative along these same lines: *"For too long we've called unbelievers to 'invite Jesus into your life.' Jesus doesn't want to be in your life. Your life's a wreck. Jesus calls you into his life."*

One of my greatest hopes for you and this church is that you will become or remain obsessed with Jesus and his life. There's no life more beautiful and influential and needed in the world today than the love and truth of Jesus. Keep trying out his truth until it transforms you and the people you influence in wonderful ways.

And as you do this and you find it difficult (and you will)... and as you confront painful life circumstances that incline you toward despair (and that happens to us all), please remember this other "fundamental thing" – **GRACE IS GREATER** than the gravity of life. I've talked so much about this idea over the past two years, I don't think I need to belabor it. I just encourage you to hold onto it and trust that the Source of All Grace is holding onto you.

Last Friday night, my brother Jeff called me in the middle of a gathering of more than 100 of our church's staff and families and Jeff shared that his cancer had now paralyzed his upper body. Though I already knew that Jeff was on hospice and dying, for a moment, the gravity of that reality completely undid me. I couldn't lead the gathering or walk or even talk. And then, God's grace came to me in the form of my wife, Amy, who simply held me. It came in the form of Steve Carter who came close and prayed for me (he's not just a great preacher; he's great pastor). Grace came in the form of all the members of my Christian community who were there for me as I know you are today. And I'm trusting in Jesus that for my brother who passed away last Sunday and the rest of our grieving family, there is also a grace greater than the gravity of life.

Believe that for yourself. God's grace is sufficient for whatever you go through (2 Cor 12:9). His grace is greater than your sin or your doubts. By the power of Christ, either in this life or the infinitely larger one beyond, you will rise (Isa 40:31). Jesus, who has all authority in heaven and on earth, has promised that he will make everything new (Rev 21:5).

I want to close today with some wisdom from one of my heroes, a man named Max DePree. Max was the CEO of the storied Herman Miller furniture company. He preceded me a few decades ago as chair of the Board at Fuller Seminary and both wrote and spoke often on the subject of leadership. Max famously said that the FIRST responsibility of a leader – whether in the home, the workplace, the church or the nation is to ***define reality***. I guess that’s what I’ve been trying to do over these years we’ve shared together. I’ve tried to describe the reality of life and the God who meets us in it and those *fundamental things* we should keep seeking to apply. I hope the Lord has used some of that for good in your life.

But Max DePree also says something about the LAST responsibility a leader has and that is to ***say thank you***. So, I want to say thank you, first to my wife AMY for being my long-suffering partner through this whole adventure and for leaving such a beautiful mark on this church through all the colorful design work she’s done throughout our buildings and the special relationships she’s built here. I am so grateful to our three sons who also sacrificed “normal holidays” and so many moments when I was out caring for other people’s families instead of them. It blows me away what impressive men you are, in spite of me. I give your mom a lot of credit for that and the youth programs here, perhaps, too.

I want to say thank you to the extraordinary STAFF of Christ Church whose remarkable devotion and gifts have made me look way better than I am. I owe an unpayable debt of gratitude to the Board of TRUSTEES who saw something in me way back in 1996 and all the trustees since then who’ve guided and governed me. I’m grateful to the ELDERS and the myriad other LAY LEADERS and VOLUNTEERS whose weekly self-giving have made our ministry and mission go.

And I want to say thank you above all to YOU, LORD, for giving me a front-row seat at all YOU have kindly chosen to do here over these twenty-eight years; for letting me get to know all these remarkable individuals and families; for allowing me the inestimable privilege of being one of the pastors of people who don’t just go to but actually know that they ARE CHRIST CHURCH.

Here’s my final NOTE AT THE DOOR: Just remember this... these fundamental things will always apply... as time goes by.