KEEP RENOVATING

**Notes at the Door (Part 2) | Ephesians 4:22-24; Heb 13:8**

Last week, I began what will be my final full series of messages as the Lead Pastor of Christ Church. I’ll preach some more during the Advent season ahead, but I want to leave you this month and then in a concluding message on January 19 with what I’m calling some NOTES AT THE DOOR –as you venture into the wonderful future God has for you. Last week, my message was to FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIALS. I encouraged you to keep holding onto some beautiful basics about our faith and this church which I tried to describe. This week I went to go to the other end of the spectrum. If last week was about where I pray you will practice principled CONTINUITY, this week is about how I hope you will pursue purposeful CHANGE.

When I think of a place of principled continuity where the essentials of the Christian faith have been lived out for a very long time, one of the images that comes to mind for me is this.You’d have to be a New Yorker to instantly recognize this building, but it is St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, directly across from Rockefeller Center. The cornerstone of this building was laid before 100,000 spectators in 1858, just about the time my German ancestors landed in this country and settled in New York City.

St. Patrick’s is the first and, to this day, the largest gothic revival Catholic cathedral in North America. Considerably longer and taller than the length of a football field, it was built to hold 19,000 people at once. I visited the cathedral a number of times growing up. Just walking through its towering nave was something of a religious experience. When the organ was playing (and my childhood best friend played a concert there once), it felt like an experience of the holiness of heaven. To me and many of the 5.5 million people who visit it each year, that cathedral seems perfect and permanent. Truth be told, however, it is neither of those things. As fabulous as it is, that building would be in serious trouble without regular renovation.

In 2012, a massive renovation project began that would ultimately cost some $177 million. According to an article in *New York Magazine:* “Workers filled the interior [of the cathedral] with a city of scaffolding. Specialists climbed it to heal cracks in stained glass, fix shattered bits of tracery with invisible puzzle pieces of steel, scour soot off blackened marble, rebuild eroded filigree, replace crumbling stones, replaster ribbed vaults, and revivify wooden screens… The most impressive [work wasn’t] even visible.” It involved “replacing the entire cooling and heating system and hooking them up to geothermal wells… 2,200 feet below Manhattan's asphalt crust. ”Before the restoration, sunlight struggled through darkened windows and got sucked into gray-green vaults. Now [however] the stained-glass glows, and the ceiling, restored to its original patterns of pale ocher on plaster, painted to resemble stone, spreads [a glorious] light on the nave below.”[[1]](#endnote-1) For another season, this place of principled continuity is magnificent, but it soon again will need purposeful change.

I give you this image to help you fix in your mind an important truth. To remain or become magnificent – to reach their God-given potential -- both individuals and institutions must KEEP RENOVATING.

Listen to what the Word of God says on this subject. **Be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom 12:2). You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds;and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24) Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:13).** In other words, while the Bible makes it clear that **Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb 13:8**), for the rest of us the program is CHANGE!

We’re not always inclined to think this way, are we? We have this tendency to think that the best way for the world to get more magnificent is for OTHERS to change. Think how much of our energy is devoted to wishing and working to make other people alter their beliefs or behaviors OR to avoiding a true reckoning with what in US needs to change. Be honest: Which list is longer, the catalogue of what your spouse or co-workers or political opponents need to change or the list of what in yourself Jesus would like to see renovated?

In the crypts (the underground burial basement) beneath another famous cathedral -- Westminster Abbey in London – there is the tomb of an Anglican bishop that is inscribed with a confession worth reflecting upon. The inscription reads: “When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it, too, seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family, those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would have been able to better my country and, who knows, I may have even changed the world.”

Jesus once asked his disciples a piercingly personal question: **Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in another’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your another, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother or sister’s eye. (Mat 7:3-5)** One of my great hopes for this church is that we will be known as a community of people who are mainly about renovating ourselves and where it is OK to admit: “I need help.”

A couple of years ago, I had lunch with a man named Ken, who grew up as the son of a plumber in Long Island, New York. Ken shared that during his freshman year of college he was very close to flunking out, when a professor in an economics class called out his name and asked him to meet after class. The professor told Ken that his attempt to explain supply and demand was the worst written essay he’d ever read. *“But I can see you get the economics,”* said the prof. *“How’re you doing in the rest of your classes?”* “The same,” answered Ken. *“You know,”* the teacher said*, “you’ll be gone from here at the end of the semester if nothing changes.”* “I know,” admitted Ken. The professor replied: *“I tell you what: I’m going to gather your other profs and we’re going to help you, but I need to know that you are truly committed to changing your habits.* “OK,” said Ken. “I’m in.”

As we sat at lunch, I could tell that Ken could probably have been a great plumber.  His father had clearly imbued in him a deep belief in the importance of home repair and improvement projects. What is interesting is that while Ken ended up going on to a career in finance rather than the trades, he used that skillset to start a little business that has assisted quite a few people with making changes of various kinds. Have you heard of HOME DEPOT? Ken Langone went on to say that there’s a question that every Home Depot is trained to ask people coming into their store. Before they ask: “Can I help you?” they’re supposed to ask: **“What are you working on?”** The assumption is that you go to a community like Home Depot not to blame other people or look for faults in other people or ask others to live life for you, but to find support with what YOU are working on.

I hope that will always be true of Christ Church too. We’re a community of people working on something important. We’re working on knowing and living more like Jesus in school, in our workplace and families. We’re working on overcoming those hurts, habits or hang-ups that are keeping us from rising to our God-given potential. We’re working on developing mindsets and skillsets that can enable us to extend the life of God’s kingdom in a complex world. And when we meet each other in the aisle, we ought to ask: What are you working on and how can I or we help with that? I could find a lot of passages in the New Testament where Jesus comes at people like that. We could too.

Let me say, FINALLY, that it occurs to me that it’s not just we as individuals who need to be thinking about change and not just continuity. It’s also we as an institution. Christ Church needs to KEEP RENOVATING too. When I first visited here in 1996, I was impressed by how perfect and permanent this community seemed. There wasn’t as much stone… the ceiling wasn’t quite as high… but it felt a little to me like St. Patrick’s Cathedral. There was this feeling that this church had “arrived” and, to be honest, it didn’t feel like too many people were asking the question: “What needs to change?”

After starting on the job here, I happened to attend a meeting of the Oak Brook Area Chamber of Commerce and heard a visiting speaker named, Christopher Galvin, the grandson of the founder of a company called MOTOROLA. You may know that one too. I remember that Christopher, who was the new CEO, was struggling to get his legendary company to innovate in the ways required to keep them a leading company. And my takeaway was a single sentence he uttered that still sends chills down my spine. Chris said: **“Success breeds inflexible orthodoxies**.” You become convinced that what got you here will keep you here. And that’s not necessarily true.

When I started working at Christ Church in 1997, I was following a thirty-year pastor who’d been very good at his job and led this congregation through an enduring period of what you’d have to call “success.” It was certainly obvious to some but not to everyone’s eye that – sort of like St. Patrick’s Cathedral in 2012 – there were some cracked windows and some flying buttresses that were failing and some generational decay and some stuff underground that were problems. I had come from the future (a place called San Diego!) I had 37-year-old eyes and I could see some places where this magnificent church needed some renovations. But this was tricky.

To switch the metaphor, a leader who’s been around for multiple decades carves out a deep, long channel. When that person’s successor comes on the scene, they meet a situation like this. You’ve got all kinds of people standing along the trench. They are pointing at different parts of the channel – the youth program, the music ministry, the adult ed offerings, the mission outreach, you name it. Some people are pointing and saying, “Oh, that’s a GROOVE that we must keep!” and others are pointing at the same place and saying, “Oh, that a RUT and we must get out of it.” Everyone has their notion of what’s a rut and what’s a groove. And they don’t all agree. If the new leader changes something, he’s upset some people. If he doesn’t change it, he’s disappointed another group of people. If the leader acts too quickly or too slowly, there are issues. Ken Langone told me that every week, he takes a group of Home Depot employees to lunch and asks them to give him feedback. Hearing how people are experiencing life matters to him and strengthens his leadership discernment.

So, this is my way of saying: Be very patient, kind and prayerful toward STEVE. I know him. He will make thoughtful decisions and with good counsel around him. You can provide him with gentle instruction. If he doesn’t do what you’ve recommended it doesn’t mean that he hasn’t listened. It’s just that he has a lot of voices along the trench and GOD is one of them. Please remember: Making changes after a long-term leader has carved out a legacy is always hard AND absolutely necessary. Churches – like people or families, business or governments -- are ever in need of reformation, renewal and revival. We see that again and again in the biblical story.

When I came here, there were so many fabulous people, programs and patterns, I worked hard to preserve as many as I knew how. But resources also needed to flow toward some daring innovations. The mission never changes but the methods sometimes have to. We are the rare classic and contemporary, high-touch and high-tech, global and domestic mission-oriented, multi-ethnic and intergenerational church we are today, because TOGETHER we somehow navigated the difficult balance between essential continuity and creative change, between difficult losses and delightful gains. And you will do this again, so long as you keep remembering that God is as eager to keep renovating you as he is to keep renovating Christ Church.

Let me say in closing that I don’t think I told you who led the fundraising effort to renovate St. Patrick’s Cathedral? It was my luncheon partner, Ken Langone. When the Cardinal of New York first asked Ken to do it, he said: *“I’m sorry, but I’m not your guy. I’m just not worthy of that role.”* “Why do you say that?” the Cardinal asked. *“Well, I’ve got this embarrassing problem,”* said Ken. *I’ve tried to repair it, but I’ve failed so far. I grew up in a tough neighborhood and have worked all my life around pretty rough people. I can’t seem to control the language that sometimes come out of my mouth. I’m afraid that if I was in that leadership position and I slipped, it would reflect badly on the church.”* With that, the Cardinal got a very concerned look on his face. Then he raised his right hand and said: “I hereby declare you absolved of all slips of the tongue – past, present, and future. Now help me with this renovation project, Ken.” Langone did. And I must say, in the almost three hours I was with him, he didn’t swear once!

As I’ll say more about next week, God does not require perfect people to accomplish his purposes. I would never have lasted this long here if he did.But I’ve learned that when we give ourselves to the life-changing work God has for us in the church and in the world, he often changes OUR lives in magnificent ways. So, whether it is in the life of your mind and soul… or that of your family… or tomorrow at work or school… my challenge to you is that after you FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIALS, KEEP RENOVATING. Whatever you are working on, don’t stop looking for the **new thing** God wants to do. That’s one more significant note I want to leave for you here at the door.

1. Justin Davidson, "What We Can Learn from the Restoration of St. Patrick's Cathedral," *New York Magazine* (9-11-15) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)