**Renewal, by Jesus**

A sermon by The Rev. Chris Wendell

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Awhile back now, Kristen and I decided to replace most of the windows in our house. It turns out we have 24 separate exterior windows, and nearly all of them were broken. They leaked. They stuck. They had no screens. We were losing valuable heat in the winter months, and using too much gas for a home of our size. We knew this when we bought the house but had put the project off. Like the good incrementalist that I tend to be, we didn’t replace them all at once, but we “phased them in” over a couple of years – trying to balance our commitment to improve our energy efficiency with our commitment to living within our means. Ours is, after all, an older house, and the windows were, by far, not the only part of our home needing renewal.

And, it turns out, that was the name of the brand of replacement window we used: Renewal. Technically, it was actually called Renewal by Anderson, which strikes me as a very clever marketing ploy. When we think of Renewal by Anderson we are meant not just to think of our longing for the renewal of the earth that more efficient windows will bring. We are also meant to think of our deeper desires for personal renewal, our yearnings for the ways we long to be refreshed, re-made, transformed into some newer, more sustainable, more whole version of ourselves. And the marketing works. Renewal by Anderson is one of the most popular brands of replacement window in the United States.

The possibility of renewal touches a deep human urge. It isn’t an urge for the kind of renewal one gets at the public library or, in days of old, at the Blockbuster Video counter. We don’t yearn just for more time to be the same as we always are. Rather we yearn to become something that we are not yet fully. We yearn to be pruned, re-shapen, animated in a new way. We year for a next chapter, a new phase, even a resurrection. At any given moment, we may find ourselves denying, minimizing or even fearing this urge, but it nevertheless remains deep within our spiritual center. We are designed to be creatures capable of renewal. It’s how God made us, and it’s how God made the world. And God sees it as very good.

Two of our readings today touch on this idea of spiritual renewal. Both speak to how we might find greater holiness in our lives through transformation and faith. But it’s funny because even though they touch the same theme of renewal through deepening our faith -- one of the readings is on my top ten list of favorite passages. And the other, I find, well, downright off-putting.

Let’s start with the latter. We’re right in the middle of the Gospel of Luke, just a chapter or so after Jesus and his first disciples turn from their time of ministry in the Galilee towards their journey to Jerusalem. The time in Galilee is a time of discovery for Jesus’ followers. They discover this wandering rabbi out in the countryside. They discover in themselves courage to leave whole chunks of themselves behind to follow him. They discover a compelling and attractive moral and spiritual vision for humanity and, indeed, all creation, in Jesus’ teachings – and they discover new empowerment to be agents of healing in the world. It is a time of great excitement and possibility and hopefulness for them. This is “Renewal, by Jesus” for them.

But that’s not all there is to Renewal by Jesus. Eventually, they leave the Galilee. Jesus turns the movement towards Jerusalem, towards the Cross. And it is on that journey that we find today’s passage, with its hard words and tough teachings. Why would Jesus ask us to hate anyone for his sake? Elsewhere Jesus tells us to love even our enemies, yet now we are asked to hate those closest to us: spouse and child and parent and sibling. In the same breath, Jesus tells us that to be his disciple, not only must we be willing to give up those relationships, we must also be willing to part with everything we own. Everything. And maybe you missed it while trying to take that all in, but Jesus also asks us to give up our lives to walk the way of the Cross with him. Our relationships. Our stuff. Our lives. These are what Jesus invites us to give. This is also “Renewal, by Jesus”. And it sounds like bad news. Very bad news.

And it would be. This path, this discipleship, would be a kind of invitation to self-destruction, if it weren’t for the promises of spiritual renewal that this kind of divestment offers us. Jesus doesn’t ask us to go out and end our lives as we know them. It’s not a suicide mission. He asks us to be ready to give them up for something more important: for a different way of life, for “thy kingdom come” as we pray. He asks us if we love God’s vision of love and wholeness and reconciliation so much, that we are willing to make it real. To let the transformation of the world begin with us. And he doesn’t sugar coat it. If we want the world to look different, really different; if we want peace and harmony with our fellow creatures and with the planet that sustains us -- then we must become radically different. That is, different at the root. Our core relationships must be reshaped to further that purpose. Our sense of what defines a successful life must start with the love of God and layer the rest on top, rather than starting with something else and trying to layer faith on top of that. Jesus promises that if we do this, a more fulfilling, holistic, and holy life awaits us, and the world. But parts of us, might die in the process. In fact, be basically promises us that they will.

It’s not often that I find myself turning in the Bible to Jeremiah for solace from the hard words of Jesus. Usually it’s the other way round. But today that’s just the case. For Jeremiah offers us what I consider to be one of the most beautiful images of spiritual renewal in the entire Bible, and it reminds us that letting some parts of ourselves die can be ok – because the dead parts aren’t judged, they are remade for the glory of God’s kingdom.

Come down to the Potter’s House and listen to my Word, says Jeremiah. He reminds us that God is an artist, and we are the clay. God’s work is to take us tenderly into the eternal hands of love, and moistens us, softens us, reshapes us and remakes us into something new. We may be spoiled clay – in many senses of the word – but, God is never done re-creating us into vessels that are both useful and beautiful. God’s imagination has a vast supply of new forms and shapes for us to try on in our life-long quest for holiness. And the best part is, it’s always with the same clay. None of it is lost. The ugliest and most spoiled forms of ourselves – the parts we sometimes wish we could just tear out for good – God refuses to destroy. Every part can be renewed. No experience or characteristic or failure needs to be thrown away, forgotten, or cast into some kind of inner darkness. Each is part of the new creation that God is forming in you. And only God knows what it will look like.

This image of God as artist is a good antidote to the poison the world often feeds us. Too often, we are fed on a diet of deficit thinking about our goodness. We are all to familiar with the ways we have NOT met whatever we imagine are God’s standards for ourselves and our lives, and we feel inadequate, guilty or insufficient. And, frankly, the church has often encouraged this kind of approach over the centuries. But I don’t think God thinks about our souls in the way we too often do. I don’t think God sees the shortcomings of our lives – our misplaced commitments, our errors in judgement, our moral complicities – when God takes us down to the potter’s house and holds us in the divine hands. The potter’s house is not a woodshed. God’s eye is not the eye of a judge, but the eye of an artist. God sees us as clay. God sees the beauty of what is trying to emerge in the next shape of our lives, and works on us, in prayer and in church and in life, to bring it into being.

This is Renewal by Jesus: both challenging and intimate. On the one hand, it is the challenge to offer as much of ourselves as we can; to put everything on the table; to be ready to let go of even the things we have clung to most dearly, because, they might be dead. On the other hand, it beckons us into new ways of being that participate more fully in the healing of the world and of our souls. It is the promise that our clay will be met with the eye of the artist and not the judge. Whatever is lost or dead will be remade into something new. This is Renewal by Jesus. We may fear the change that it offers. We may mourn the letting go of what we’ve always known. But we walk the same path shared by many disciples in many ages past. And that path will take us not just to the Cross, but through the Cross, into a renewed life of more and more glory. Amen.