

The Spirit of Renewal: #2 “Renewing Our World”

Romans 15:1-7, 13

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As we are renewed by grace, followers of Jesus Christ are called to offer their lives for others.

If you are familiar with any of the home improvement shows, you know that there is a multi-thousand-dollar difference in the terms “refresh” and “renovate.” To refresh a room or a house may be as simple as buying new sheets and towels, or perhaps even a coat of paint. On television, a refresh is what a designer does when they are told the owner has run out of money. The typical response is the designer shrugs his or her shoulders, pouts a bit and then says, “Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

But “renovation” is the magic word. It is the word that unlocks all sorts of potential. Renovation means sledge hammers and destruction, moving walls and paying out of the world prices for hand carved Italian marble countertops that were polished by Michelangelo. Renovation means bathrooms bigger than our grandparent’s living rooms, with enough room to fit a small family. Renovation is what stirs the imagination of the designer. Saying yes to renovation is opening yourself to complete transformation, if not complete bankruptcy.

Paul’s letter to the Romans could perhaps be called the New Testament’s equivalent to a whole house renovation. Paul is infused with the Good news of the Gospel. He writes with passion, his words practically flying off the page as he shares his passion for Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ, Paul claims, who has transformed all of creation. God, the creator of the universe, has spoken through Christ.

And he aims his letter at a church in need of renovating. A few years before Romans was written, we know that the Emperor Claudius had expelled all people of Jewish descent, even those who were Christians, out of Rome. As the Jewish Christians left, Gentile believers expanded the church, As David Bartlett notes, it was Gentile practices that prevailed in the worship and organization of the church. When food was served in the house churches, it was Gentile food that was being served. Following Claudius’ death, Nero lifted the ban on Jews, and Christian Jews began returning to Rome. And when he came back, they found that their congregations had changed. Gentile practices had replaced the practices inherited from the synagogues. The Jewish Christians returned to a house that had been refreshed just enough that they did not recognize it.

But Paul, whose own life had been renovated and transformed, believes that neither the Jewish Christians nor the Gentile Christians had done enough to renovate the church. He yearns for the church to be a place where all believers can know they are accepted and valued by Christ.

And so, he rips the structure straight down to the studs, instructing them to “welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you.”

Paul has no time for refreshing the old structure. Paul’s Gospel is a gospel of the new creation. “If anyone is in Christ,” he proclaimed to the Corinthians, “they are a new creation. Behold the old is gone

and the new has come.” The renovation Paul has in mind goes a lot further than ripping up carpet and slapping new paint on the walls.

And throughout Christian history, whenever the church has found itself in need of renewal, its preachers and teachers have turned to Romans. In 386, a young man struggling to find his way in life heard God speak to him, saying, “Pick up and read.” And when Augustine began reading Romans, his life was changed. In 1505, a young monk named Martin Luther was struggling to understand what it meant to dedicate his life to God. Did salvation occur through his own efforts? These questions dogged Martin Luther until he began lecturing on Romans in 1517. It changed his life. In the 1930s, with Europe on the brink of war, a young pastor named Karl Barth had a similar experience. Reading through Romans, he found that his entire theological house had been renovated by God.

So let me share with you a confession and a wish: as beautiful and stirring as Paul’s words are, they are difficult to preach, and for that reason I’ve found it hard to preach from Romans. That’s my confession, but here’s my birthday wish: it is my wish that, when I grow up, God may equip me to preach a thoroughly comprehensible sermon from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. Maybe some of you were hoping I’d stop at preaching a thoroughly comprehensible sermon!

In many ways, Romans is almost like an elusive holy grail for preachers. It was likely Paul’s last written work. It is also the longest and arguably most complex of his letters. Paul’s words raise our pulse as he offers the deep assurance of salvation by Christ’s grace. He extols the promise of God, a promise given to all people. And he leads the church to consider the obligations related to this promise.

It is a whole-house renovation.

He preaches the meaning of the Gospel, instructing Christians to continue the work Christ has begun in repairing the world.

These words call us to the practice of faith, to the work our Jewish siblings have long called “tikum olam,” the repair of the world. In Romans, Paul not only retraces the work God has done, but he spells out what the church is called to do. He calls God’s people to be renewed in the Spirit for the sake of love. That love repairs the world, heals divisions, renovates the household of God. And it is a love that continues to renew us as we serve one another.

But, in case you have not noticed, Christians have not always embraced this call to patience and unity. We have preferred that people see things our way rather than seeing their needs. As one person recently said at a meeting to discuss church conflict, “Friends, my wife and I have visited a lot of churches. And I tell you this: you can smell a conflicted and divided church as soon as you set foot inside the building.”

In her research of contemporary churches, Diana Butler Bass has noted the way she encountered churches where unity thrives in the midst of diversity. She writes of hearing churches describe themselves as “one big family,” despite political, social, and even theological differences. The most vibrant churches, she notes, were actively pursuing diversity. In the words of one pastor, “Despite their differences, the (members of my church) have two things in common: they have come to the door of this particular church and stayed, and, if you listen to them tell their stories as I have, you would be

persuaded that God's Spirit has been leading them and forming them for a very long time."¹She wrote that book more than 16 years ago, and in that time divisions have only increased. But hear the way they resonate with Paul's call to be renewed for the purpose of serving one another.

As Bass says, "Jesus never issued a demand for uniformity. Rather, he beckoned people to follow with a promise of healing, transformation, and love—that he would make known to his disciples "the way of life." He did not say that his followers would be alike; he said that despite their differences, they would be changed by love."²

We would be changed. Renovated. Cabinets of lies demolished, dividing walls of hostility torn down. And in its place a new structure, a new way of life. A way of life marked by the grace of Christ that extends across divisions. A way of life that calls the church from silos of isolation into rich, loving, and grace-filled community.

Paul's hand pushes against the paper: "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor." He bristles against distinctions and divisions, praying for God's steadfast encouragement to come and fill the community with hope so that it may live in harmony with each other.

These are the words which bring renewal. These are the words that invite us to join together in mission and service. We become followers on the Way, renewed by the Spirit, sent into the world to serve, share, welcome, and embrace.

Sydney Carter, the writer of the hymn, 'The Lord of the Dance' once remarked that "The kingdom of heaven...lies ahead of us, yet it travels in us too. We are pulled in two directions, and we have a choice. We are privileged or condemned to be free. WE can drag or dance along."³

We need to be reminded of that invitation every now and then. When I was working as a youth minister, I needed to be reminded of them nearly every day! The church I served had Wednesday Youth Club meetings that began at 3:00 and lasted until 6:30. The church basement was filled with boisterous, sweaty, sixth and seventh graders for whom "being still" was a foreign concept. There were many nights I'd look at them and say, "I am so glad that Jesus loves you, because right now I'm having a hard time."

But middle school youth can fool you. Just when you think they're not listening, they repeat something you have just said. You see them hear the promise of God: you are accepted. You can live with hope.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, p. 145.

² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³ Quoted in Peter Steinke, *A Door Set Open*.