

“Restoration”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 1/6/19

Restoration is a tricky thing. When I was sixteen I came into possession of a 1963 Apache Chevrolet pickup truck. It's original blue paint had faded from a royal blue to ore of an ugly, sun baked sky blue. It's wood slats in the bed of the pickup truck had all but rotten away. The seat was no longer attached to the frame. And it seemed impossible to restore to almost anyone, except me. I was determined that this would be my truck, my first vehicle. I had visions of driving it down the street with everyone coming out of their houses to see this fine specimen of history back on the road. I would spend hours just sitting in its cab with my eyes closed, hands on the loose steering wheel, pretending I was driving it and somehow it miraculously looked gorgeous, and everyone who was lucky enough to gaze upon it was utterly impressed. “There goes Dan in his 1963 Apache Chevrolet pickup truck!” My obsession with a vehicle I did not have the mechanical acumen nor the funds to restore and get running again was a daily one, which only further encouraged friends who would remind me from time to time: “Oh, yeah, Dan you have a truck, right?” While winking and laughing hysterically at the question itself. I was not amused. For months and months I dreamed and dreamed. Then, without warning, times must have been hard at home, because I came home one day and the truck was gone. My stepfather had sold it. A word was never spoken between us about it. But I remember not a week had gone by that I saw that truck, still with its sunbaked blue factory paint, but only this time it was driving down the road not far from our house. I saw it alive, rolling down the road—but seeing it unrestored as it made its way down the street, I realized that my visions of grandeur were a bit inaccurate compared to reality: It really did look like a pile of junk driving down the road, unrestored. I thought to myself, “What was I thinking?”

In Isaiah 60, the prophet gives the people of Israel hope even while there was to be an impending exile into the Assyrian and Babylonian kingdoms. They would be captives for generations, subjugated and enslaved. However, Isaiah 60 provided hope of restoration. That a day would come, after all the bad would happen: the rust, the rotten, the faded, the destroyed, the ruined... after all had been destroyed and left to simply die—a day would come when the sun would rise, darkness would abate, and life would return. A day would come when you would be the source of light over all the earth. When your restoration would actually prompt the restoration of others as well. So, do not be discouraged. Do not be disheartened. The scripture says, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” And the exciting thing was that they would not come seeking to enslave and plunder anymore. They would come seeking to be restored just as you had been restored. What a concept.

The disciples had been concerned with much the same when Peter seemingly complained to Jesus in Mark 10, “We have left everything to follow you.” And it's true. Peter and the others had left their homes, their livelihoods, their normalcy, the familiar, in exchange for material uncertainty, homelessness, living moment to moment, no steady income, and all for what? Simply put, they left it all for a dream for something that transcends physical needs and wants. They left it all in hopes of building a kingdom like no other. To be at the Messiah's side as they restore the kingdom of David, a kingdom free from Roman oppression. This is what they had thought, anyway. They gave up any level of comfort and security for freedom. They wanted their children and their children's children to be free. They wanted to see a true restoration, much like the one Isaiah had foretold. Jesus consoled Peter and the others with a simple promise: All will be restored in this life and the next. Jesus believed strongly in the teaching of restoration.

See, so I wasn't without inspiration as I dreamed of restoring my '63 Apache Chevrolet Pickup Truck, right? God is in the business of restoration. It seems to be at the very essence of God's nature. Tikkun Olam, a concept which I allude to pretty frequently, is the Jewish concept of God's ultimate restoration. This idea is embodied by an ultimate act of restoring the broken pieces of our wholeness, like shards of light flung throughout creation, hidden, and it is God's master plan to bring the shards back together... to find that which was lost, to restore that which was broken... and optimally, we are to be a part of that plan, to participate actively in that dream—to help bring about such a grand restoration. Our inward journey often focuses on our own personal restoration, our own inner calibrations. We want to syncopate our spiritual selves with the Creator and with creation—we seek to find harmony and purpose within its connections. This is the task of all of us, on an individual level. We find deep truth in the Buddhist idea of “It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles.” Even Jesus added new truth to this noble idea when he said in Matthew 10, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” This can be interpreted that even knowing yourself just for the sake of knowing yourself, without greater selfless purpose, finds little meaning on this earth. Therefore, if your life doesn't turn towards helping others, then its purpose is lost. A restoration that doesn't then turn towards inspiring the restoration of others is a person who is not truly restored in the first place. This is our outward journey, our personal movement beyond our inward journey—into our calling in this life.

As I sat, hours on end, in the drivers seat of that rust bucket 1963 Apache Chevrolet pickup truck, imagining the impossible, I would learn one thing. It's not impossible with others. I lacked the skill and money to make my dream a reality. However, there were others around that had the skills and resources I needed to see my dream come to fruition. This is why we have each other. Many times we will need each other to see full restoration happen in our lives. There are others that can contribute to that restoration. They may share our vision, and have ways to help make it happen. Tikkun Olam is not an individualistic venture. To see massive restoration all around us, it takes all of us. I couldn't see that as a 16 year old sitting in that truck. However, as you know, when the truck was given to another, half of my vision was instantly fulfilled. It was running again. A dead thing became a live thing. I didn't know how to incorporate the skills of others at that time. I was still learning how humanity works, and in many ways I still am. Nevertheless, I know now that bringing about true restoration, justice, and wholeness, will take all of us. It will take the thinkers, and the feelers, and the do-ers. It will take us all.

So, I ask you to keep an open mind. Let us restore that which was broken. Let us fulfill that which was envisioned, and let us climb to the top of this mountain together. Much like our founder Bev Cosby taught us, we must find Christ hidden all around us. In his 1977 sermon, Bev said, “Of the poor become the objects of our charity. We often do it for them thinking in turn God is going to do something for us... Jesus is telling us something quite different. It is difficult to get a hold of but if we can ever grasp it, it will mean the most significant shift we can probably ever make in our lifetime—in our thinking and in our mode of operating in this world... Christ is hidden in the world. In the hungry, in the thirsty, the alien, the naked, the sick and imprisoned. And because of our limited perception, we may not be able to recognize him there... Mrs. Elliott is Jesus. Mr. Bayes is Jesus. Mrs. Clark is Jesus. Mr. McDaniel is Jesus... and when we are in the presence of these people, we are the presence of Christ... and whatever we do or don't do with the least of these people, we are doing it to or with him—that is, Christ.”

My only question for us is this: Are there names of people that we can simply list like Bev did so easily forty years ago? Have we found Christ in our midst again? And if not, why not? And as my Pawpaw used to say: "Ya'll better get after it!"

Peace and grace.