

FIXER UPPER: RENOVATION OF THE HEART

Time to Renovate (John 15:1-11 NRSV)

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/renovations-of-the-heart-time-to-renovate

Christ's work in our lives meets our deepest needs and longings.

My favorite home renovation show was *Trading Spaces* on The Learning Channel in the early 2000s. Two teams, two days, \$1,000. Each team has the help of a professional designer and a carpenter and race against the clock to redecorate a room in each-other's homes. While the neighbors show up, work hard, and have long nights of literal homework, the vision and direction were in the hands of the knowledgeable designer and carpenter. Sometimes the designers were a little crazy and totally went rogue, like Designer Hildi Santo-Tomas who glued straw to the living room walls. Actual straw. That homeowner was definitely not happy. But often, under the leadership of skilled designers and carpenters along with the willingness of the families to show up and do the work, the room renovations met and even exceeded the family's needs and longings for their home. They simply needed to hand over the keys, trust the designer, and be willing to do some work.

We love the idea of renovating for many reasons. Some reasons are healthy like making some changes that work better for our family or add more beauty, enjoyment, or value to our home. But some reasons are unhealthy like never being satisfied with what we have or wanting to keep up with the Jones. Entire television networks are devoted to home renovations and millions of dollars are invested in the renovation of our homes, but what about investing in the renovation of our heart? Many of us are aware that our hearts are in disrepair and neglected. For some of us, anxiety, fear, anger, pride, or dissatisfaction rule the roost of our heart. We recognize the way we are living our lives doesn't really work, and we are longing for something more, needing something more. But instead of really working on the source of the cracks in our lives, we just roll on another layer of paint or hang a picture over it, hoping it will fix the problems underneath. But it doesn't. The cracks deepen and grow. Friends, we are fixer uppers, and it is time for a renovation of the heart.

Now, if you've been through a home renovation before, the words, "it's time for renovation" may bring you anything but joy. Hives, yes. Dread, yes. Clutching your wallet, yes. Joy, maybe not so much.

But here is the good news for us. The renovation of your heart is not your project to manage. You are not the lead contractor or architect. Yes, we have a part in cooperating with God, which is what we'll explore in this series, but the renovation work is the work of Christ in us. Our job is to

hand over the keys to our heart to Christ and to create space for Christ to do what only he can do in our lives. Our assignment is to reside in Christ be open to the work he wants to do, trusting Christ's work in our lives will meet our deepest needs and longings.

Sounds simple enough but let's be honest: most of us have an adverse reaction to handing over the keys to anything and most of us struggle with a severe case of *production-itis*. A fake word, yes, but a real issue. Everywhere around us and within us is a pressure to measure our worth by what we make happen. At work, at home, in relationships, in our hobbies, in our spiritual life, we often ask, what did I accomplish? What did I do? What fruit did I bear? Our hearts feel depleted because our production is incorrectly sourced from our very limited resources. Our burnout is not usually a result of trying to give too much; it is the result of trying to give what is not really within us. Which is why Jesus, who loves us and cares for us, spoke these words in John 15. For context, these words are spoken the night before Jesus' death in the upper room with his followers as he prepares them for his physical absence. Jesus' statements that he was about to go away left them sad, so he has also comforted them, and us today, with words of assurance and instruction.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^{ed} my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. John 15:1-11 (NRSV)

This summer was my first adventure with gardening. I usually travel most of the summer, which is not suitable to gardening, but when it became clear in April that no one was going anywhere for a long time, I gave it a go. The Pridemore family built a couple garden beds for me; Jeff Feeler and Nathan Hamler brought me some good soil; I planted the seeds, watered the seeds, watched the seeds, and waited. And waited. Soon, green began to grow into beautiful zucchini, tomato, and pepper plants. And eventually, little baby vegetables and fruit began to appear, and grow, ready to be harvested. I was in awe with this entire process and understood why it is so often used as metaphors for matters of faith. I had to prepare and nurture the soil and tend to the conditions I

could control, but there was little more I could do to bear the fruit. I had to do my part, trust the process, and wait for growth to come. When I ran into challenges, I asked knowledgeable people about the symptoms, and followed their instructions.

Like when my zucchinis failed to really grow before they would start rotting on the vine. For a while, I thought I'd accidentally purchased seeds for mini zucchinis. When I looked at the garden, I saw big lush green plants that looked healthy, but it wasn't producing correctly. What I learned was that if I didn't prune them back, none of the pollinators could find the flowers on the plant and do their thing. That was why my mini zucchinis weren't growing as they were designed to do. So, I pruned, a lot, trusting the experts, and after a couple weeks, things took off. Soon, I was looking up zucchini recipes and begging people to take some of my harvest.

Tending to my garden was a spiritual practice for me. In those quiet moments of pulling weeds, pruning branches, feeding the soil, and picking the reward, I marveled far more at the process than my hand in it because I was aware of how little I offered to the outcomes. Yes, I made a home for the garden. Yes, I planted the seeds and tending to the environment, but I did not grow it. The Apostle Paul also knew this, and when reminding new believers in the city of Corinth to look to Christ and not Paul as the one who would form them, Paul wrote, *Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us—servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment. I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. It's not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the center of this process but God, who makes things grow. 1 Corinthians 3:5-7*

We are not at the center of our renovation. God is.

Abolitionist and author Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, "How does the branch bear fruit? Not by incessant effort for sunshine and air, not by vain struggles. . . . It simply abides in the vine, in silent and undisturbed union, and blossoms, and fruit appear as of spontaneous growth. How then shall a Christian bear fruit? By efforts and struggles to obtain that which is freely given? . . . No: there must be a full concentration of the thoughts and affections on Christ, a complete surrender of the whole being to Him, a constant looking to Him for grace."

Friends, we're in the dead of winter, my garden is buried under snow, and I must confess I've forgotten some of my garden lessons. I'm back to suffering from production-itis, and I desperately need this Lent season to renovate my heart and remind me God is the gardener of my life, Christ is the vine, and I am the branch. Maybe you need this reminder, too.

If we attempt this season of renovation by our own efforts, we will fail – not just in our attempt to bear fruit because apart from Him we do nothing. We will also fail to receive the joy Jesus promises for those who abide in him completely. When we don't stay close to Jesus and follow His lead, we are cut off from the ongoing nourishment of God's love, power, and grace. No wonder we become tired, discouraged and depleted. We are called to dwell 24/7 with Christ, and engage in a slow, ongoing process of inviting him into every nook and cranny of our lives so he might renovate us from the inside out.

So, how might we begin to abide in Christ? How can we learn to stay close to him in this season? Here are four next steps as we begin this journey together.

First of all, keep joining us for this sermon series the next six weeks. Each week we will learn more about how God can renovate and reframe our lives, and we will be companions together on this renovation journey.

Second, I want to challenge you to join one of our Lenten small groups for the next six weeks. There are five groups beginning this week, two today. Most are virtual, one will meet in-person at the church. These groups are led by excellent teachers who will guide participants through the book, *Renovation of the Heart*, by Dallas Willard. You don't need to purchase the book for the class. Just sign up and join other believers also learning how to abide with Christ and be transformed by his love. It isn't too late to join. Visit fbcjc.org/lent for sign up information.

Third, Scripture Memory. Meditate on and memorize our Lent memory verse – John 15:5. Write it in multiple places. Read it. Sit with it. Memorizing and meditating on the words Jesus read and the words Jesus said is a powerful way to abide with Jesus.

Last, Spiritual Practices. Throughout this series, we want to continue to learn spiritual disciplines or practices. The practices do not transform or renovate us; "they become opportunities to open the heart to the Spirit who transforms"ⁱ. One such practice we've been learning together is the breath prayer. For Lent, we have one breath prayer to repeat for the entire series, rather than a new one each week like we did in the last series. Breath prayer is a way of abiding with Christ. As you go about your day, silently pray this prayer as you breathe.

Inhale: You are the vine.

Exhale: I am a branch.

Inhale: I do nothing

Exhale: Apart from you.

Amen.

May this be our prayer as we journey together through this season inviting God to renovate our hearts. May we remember it is Christ at work in us and apart from him, we can do nothing.

Prayer –

God, we're so grateful for the reminder of scripture, the freedom and the love you offer to us. We try so hard, always feeling like our worth and our value is found in what we produce and in what we do, even for you. But God you are so clear in your Word that you are the source of growth and change, and that we simply need to turn over the keys of our lives and heart to you, and abide with Christ, to dwell with Christ, to focus our thoughts and our hearts and lives on Christ. And God we thank you for the relief that comes from knowing we don't have to earn anything or do anything to earn you love and grace, we simply need to abide in You, and You will do the work. God, grant us patience, grant us a desire for this kind of life and help us as we begin to learn in new and fresh ways how you, through love, can renovate our lives and hearts. In Christ we pray. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

*Go into your week
Resting in God,
Abiding in Christ,
Renovated by the Spirit.
Amen.*

ⁱ Quote from Dr. John H. Coe as posted on Steve Carter Twitter account (@steveryancarter), Feb. 16, 2021