

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

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“Releasing, Renewing, Restoring God’s World”

January 24, 2010

Luke 4:14-21

Richard King wanted a 1961 Pontiac the moment he got his driver’s license. He loved the design of the car. His father had developed the tooling in that car’s engine. He had grown up in the city of Pontiac, surrounded by images and talk about the car company shared its name with the city.

But at 16, Richard had nowhere near enough money to afford such a fine automobile, and really, at such an immature age, he had no business driving one. So he admired the ’61 Pontiac from a distance for almost 50 years.

Today, my uncle Rich is restoring a ’61 Pontiac. He happily spends 7 hours in the garage to assemble two small pieces on the car. Now, I admittedly know nothing about cars, and even less about car restoration. But as Rich explained to me the process of restoring a car, I began to find parallels in our text today and in our theme for the year – “Releasing, Renewing, Restoring God’s World.”

Uncle Rich told me that, before you choose what car you’re going to restore, you’ve got to look at your whole situation. You’ve got to know what constraints you’ve got on your life. If you’ve got a spouse and kids and a job, you aren’t going to be able to spend 7 hours a day in the garage. You may have financial constraints such that you might be able to buy a junked up old car, but you can’t spend the money you need to fully restore it.

Before we can begin partnering with God in restoring God’s world, we have to consider what’s holding us back. We have to know what we need to be released from before we can go about the work of releasing God’s world.

Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah where it says "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This passage is the summation of everything Jesus will do through his life, death and resurrection. The gospels tell the story of the Jesus event, this moment in time in the history of God’s work in restoring the world. In the Jesus event, the sick are healed, the dead are raised. People are set free from all that would hold us captive, make us spiritually blind, keep us in poverty, and maintain systems of oppression. Jesus is this releasing event, this moment in time in the history of God’s work in restoring the world.

Now, in order to be released, we have to understand the ways we are held captive. We have to have our eyes opened to the addictions, the fears, the “isms” – racism, classism, sexism – to the resentments and

selfish desires that hold us back from being in restored relationship with God and each other. Friends, we are all held captive to something.

What helps us face our captivity is the good news that we are released from this captivity

in the Jesus event. We were purchased for God just like an old '61 Pontiac.

Maybe you've experienced this release personally, in freedom from addiction or abuse or resentment. Maybe you've seen this release show up in the lives of others and wondered,

"when will this happen for me?"

Jesus declared that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," the freedom event has occurred. So why do we still feel captive to our selfish motives, our destructive habits, or our worst fears?

You'll notice that the scripture says, "Jesus began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The writer of Luke puts this ongoing action – "began to say to them" – alongside a conclusive statement – "Today this scripture has been fulfilled." Luke's gospel portrays a picture of God's work in the world that is an ongoing process marked by specific events in human history.

If we each look back over our lives, we can identify particular moments of release. Maybe they felt life-changing at the time, and maybe some of them did change the outcome of our story. But there's no such thing as happily ever after. These are events that begin a process. In the story of God's relationship with the world, releasing is the event. Renewing is the process.

According to Rich, renewing requires a plan.

You have to assess how bad off the car is. You have to decide what can be saved and what needs to be replaced. You have to decide what problems you can ignore and what has to be addressed. For a serious restoration, one must strip the entire car down to its chassis (and Rich did have to explain to me that the chassis is the bare frame of the car).

There are 13,000 parts in a typical car. All of these parts have to be catalogued as you remove them, creating what is called a disassembly manual. This manual is invaluable when you come back a year later to reassemble the car. Uncle Rich, a profoundly spiritual philosopher and agnostic, stated, and I quote, that the "disassembly manual is your bible."

Likewise, the renewal of God's world requires careful planning and assessment and the use of a bible.

We must be keen observers of the world so we truly understand how bad off things really are. Is it all media hype, or are there much more systemic problems that no one is even aware of?

We have to make choices about what aspects of the world can be repaired and what things need to be overhauled. Can a regime change give people freedom, or do we need to work for justice in the whole of a society?

We have to analyze which problems need our attention immediately and which ones we need to be prayerfully patient about. We can send money to help the immediate needs of the people of Haiti, but we may have to wait for the right time to help our child come to faith or help a friend face her addiction.

Our bible is very much like a disassembly manual. It outlines how God's world came apart and how it can be put back together. We've got to study it closely, and use it well.

Our sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are also forms of renewal. Each time we baptize someone into the community of faith, we are renewed in our baptism and we are renewing our community. Each time we come to the Lord's Table, we are renewed in our relationship with Christ and with each other. Each time we do these things, we see the image of God show up in our midst.

This is the kind of renewal the apostle Paul is talking about in his letter to the Colossians.

He says, "you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator."

We are being renewed in God's image. Every time the image of God shows up in our lives and in the world, that is a sign of renewal.

Paul goes on to say that "¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

In the renewal of God's world, we've got to strip away, disassemble our very selves, all those parts that have rusted or corroded or broken down in the relationship God intends us to have with each other and with God. And we've got to put on those original parts that make us in the image of God – all those things that help us do God's work and be God's people in the world.

As for the final product, Uncle Rich explains that there are different kinds of restoration.

There are those Corvette, Thunderbird, Packard – types who hire out most of their work

and end up making the car better than it actually was when it was new. Then there are those who modify a car that is not too bad off. It's a quicker and cheaper way of restoring a car. Finally, you have the category Uncle Rich ascribes to, which he calls the "As it Was" group. They keep the glitches that might have been there originally and work to make the car just as it was on the lot the year it was sold. They spend countless hours and lots of money to get original replacement parts and put everything together just as it was.

This "as it was" restoration is what God is about.

God made the world good, and God has released the world from its captivity. God is in the process of renewing the creation – showing up in our story, in our sacraments, and in our lives. Finally, God is

restoring the relationship God had with the creation in the very beginning. God is making the world “as it was.”

One of these days, after long, difficult, and costly work, Rich’s manual will help him put his ’61 Pontiac back together. What was lost, broken, and discarded will be restored to its original state. He’ll shine it up and show it off – maybe eventually sell it.

For uncle Rich, restoration goes far beyond a car that looks nice, an automobile he can drive or sell. When he talked about the results of a restoration, he didn’t talk about the car at all. He talked about his sense of accomplishment, the sense of purpose this work gives him.

Restoring a car restores his soul.

When God’s world is restored, something is given back that was lost or taken. A restored world gives us back the relationship God intended us to have with God and with each other. This is not just a “next-life” or end of the world prospect. This is a hear-and-now restoration.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus told them, basically, “that’s for me to know and you to find out.” And then he told them to get up and go be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” And then he was gone.

Restoration is not the finished product. It’s not the kingdom being restored to Israel or a utopian paradise. Restoration is the fruit of our labors. It’s the results of how we are changed by the process. It’s what being changed by our relationship with Jesus Christ empowers us to do in the world, to the very ends of the earth.

The restoration of God’s world is not just about the world. It’s about what this work does to us. The finished product of our labors might be food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, friendship for the lonely. But the restoration that occurs is in our very souls and spreads to everyone we encounter.

In releasing, renewing and restoring God’s world, releasing is the event. It has happened in the Jesus event, and continues to happen in our lives and in the world. Our work is to seek awareness of what we need to be released from, even as we partner with God to release others from their captivity.

Renewal is the process. It is the process of disassembling what is broken down and reassembling what is good. Our work in this process is to follow the manual, participate in acts of renewal, and point out where we see God’s image in the world as signs of renewal. Restoration is the results, the change that occurs in us and in the world that restores the goodness of God’s creation.

Rich waited 50 years to get his ’61 Pontiac. To a 16-year-old kid, that seems like forever. In truth, it’s pretty close to a lifetime. But whether it takes a moment, or a lifetime, or an age, God’s world will be released, renewed and restored. Because it is God who is working God’s purposes out.

God's release, renewal, and restoration happens every day, and it will keep happening, until everyone and everything is restored, "as it was," is made good, is brought back into relationship, and is made back into the image of God. To whom be all glory forever and ever. Amen.