

“Spiritual Renewal”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
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Spiritual renewal - this phrase, you've heard it before. It's the fundamental building block of life together in this community of faith. Renewal is a word that has been used over the decades. I think of the word urban renewal, attempts to revitalize cities that had been crumbling down or the idea to renew by taking a sabbatical or maybe even just a weekend retreat. It has been a summer for the records here in the West Valley, and for you who are not experiencing it as I said in the introduction, boy, you've missed something. It's good to be part of a record, the most days 110 and above, the most lows 90 or above. My goodness gracious, do we need renewal and that captures the idea that one way to renew is to get out of the environment you're in and sometimes that's absolutely necessary. I hope for those who have been here in the summer, you've gotten away at least up to the mountains of Arizona for a brief retreat or respite. Thank God for air conditioning. Thank God for pools, but the environment of simply changing the environment is not sufficient for spiritual renewal, maybe an interesting part of it, but if that was the case to renew means changing environment, we would never stay anywhere. We leak. We are broken vessels, cracked vessels. As my seminary professor said, we're cracked pots, and we leak, and so we need renewal on a constant basis, and if it only came from changing the environment we would always be changing our environment, never living fully into the day and so this encouragement. It comes from this understanding that God is a God of renewal. It is an amazing thing in the Gospel lesson when Peter says to Christ, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” The Psalm says it this way, “I will give thanks to you O Lord with my whole heart and before the gods I will sing your praise.” There is something absolutely refreshing in renewing, about claiming the love of God as primary in your life. To state that, “Jesus, you are my Lord and my Savior,” sometimes it sounds like a script. We expect people to do it kind of out of a somewhat legal obligation, say the right things. That's nothing to do with saying the right things. It's saying the truth, that with our whole heart that God renews us through the love of Jesus Christ. Before the gods I will sing your praise. All the other gods that come and seek to claim our attention, jobs, money, politics, all the variety of things that come and that are expressions of our life of faith but are certainly not that which we put our faith into. That is Jesus Christ, and so I encourage you to say, “You are my Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. I love you. You are the healer. You are the one.” It's a beautiful way, not a script but a statement that allows our whole hearts to claim the truth. It's a beautiful statement of faith, and it's on this faith, this gift of the Holy Spirit, that the church has built this proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The Epistle text is now where I'll spend the rest of my time as encouragement for spiritual renewal. Paul said it this way in Romans 12, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” I'm going to start with that last word. Perfect does not

mean without mistake. Perfect in this sense means towards the goal, towards the goal of the kingdom of God. We are going to make mistakes. Do not wait to be a person of faith until you make no mistakes. That's a big mistake. The mistake of not engaging in life is one that all of us fall prey to, to be cautious and to wait. It is not that type of perfection. It means towards a goal, what is good and honoring, and oh my goodness, does this world need good news of love and loving action, faith in action, compassionate action. Don't be conformed but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. It's a beautiful phrase that continues into the gifts that we have from God, this unity that we have in the church, one body but many members, same, of not all the same function as members, so we are many, are one in Christ but individually we are members of one another. I remember teaching confirmation and it seemed to me like the kids thought that it was a test about how to be the Christian, a Christian, the quote-unquote perfect Christian. I used to say no, no, no, no. Confirmation is rules and guidelines and encouragement for you to be you, the person that God has made that let God's gifts flow through you. It is not a conformity model. It's a transforming model where you can really state forward your statement of faith for the beauty of the world, and that's what we have here, so many different gifts, speaking God's truth prophetically, being able to state the truth of God's word to others, and the gift that comes with that role is the gift of faith, because it takes faith to be able to utter your understanding of what God's word is. It takes faith to study God's word. To be a prophet is often a lonely business, because it is by definition taking a stake forward, a step forward, and the gift that comes correspondingly is faith. So, spiritual renewal comes from claiming that role if God has given you that role. Now if you don't know what your role is, as you listen to these, seek if there's any clues in your life of your spiritual giftedness, in your role.

The second is ministry, and it's not so much being a minister. It's about helping other people serving other people to minister. Diacona, the Greek word to serve one another, it's to basically wash the feet of others and take that towel. Some of our members have a great gift in helping and serving one another, and it is a gift. It is one that sometimes is demeaned. It is absolutely essential to the growth of the church, and if you are called to be a minister and serving others, look for the gift of faith that God gives you in that willing heart to be able to step forward. How renewing it is to reclaim your role as a minister, a teacher, or instructor, in the Greek word. Teaching others is a privileged role. We have many teachers here in our congregation, and let's face it, all of us are teaching something to someone else, our children or our grandchildren or to our spouse, but for those who are teaching the faith, this combination of teaching and the excitement of bringing forward, drawing forth the education, drawing forth the love of God to others through the study of the scriptures and through study of great leaders of the church and the words and the creeds, and just it's never ending, the beauty of teaching others. If you're called to be a teacher and you have not yet done it, what a spiritual renewal it is to step forward in faith and to begin your teaching role.

Exhorter, to exhort, to encourage. It's a little bit deeper than a cheerleader. I remember back in West Point we had a very profound cheer. It went like this. I played on a good basketball team. There were better players than me, but if you made a basket (Let's just say I made a basket.), they would say, "Lowell made a basket, yeah." That was a cheer. I didn't get to hear it enough, but

it was a great cheer, and I just wanted to say it's important to have people cheering you on, encouraging you, and if you are an encourager, oh Lord what great renewal when you're able to encourage other people through your words, your writing, through your phone calls, through any action you take to encourage people. Encourage simply means to strengthen one's heart, and what a spiritual renewal it is to share as a person of encouragement and what a renewal it is to receive.

A giver, now giver is a word that describes generosity, and for some of us the capacity to give is a true spiritual gift. It is not meant to be willy-nilly. It is not meant to be anything than utter beautiful stewardship, knowing that everything is the Lord's, and the way that we're called to account for that to be generous to the Lord's work and to other people is absolutely a sense of renewal, when money is treated as an agency for ministry and not simply as a tool. It is a gift and the renewing gift of generosity to touch people's lives through the giving of gifts of time, of talents and resources, and of one's thoughts and prayers. To be totally for the Lord is a wonderful gift.

Two more. To lead, what a time to be a leader. No one is being respected for being a leader. It is a difficult time to take a step forward and lead, but the corresponding gift with this is the ability to give one's best. That's all you can do, which is enough to just give of one's best to the sake of the cause, to be humble and seeking the Lord's mission in ministry. What spiritual renewal comes to take a step forward when God has placed a burning vision in your heart, a sense of purpose, a way of bringing healing to the world, a way of eradicating that which should be gone from our world - hunger and sickness and a variety of other things. However, God motivates you to take a step forward. You will experience renewal when you begin leading. It will not be easy but give one's best.

And the last is compassion. It's a hallmark of the Christian church is to be compassionate, to suffer with another person, to take the time and the energy not to treat a person as a problem to be solved but as a fellow brother or sister in Christ. The need for compassionate care, and the corresponding gift there is a cheerful readiness. So, my encouragement for those who are compassionate is just keep enough time in the day to be ready for the interruptions in life for other people that you see as opportunities to give compassionate care to another person. Many of us will go by not even seeing the person in need, but for those of you that have the gift from God to have compassion for others, one that I wish was more widely spread even in my own life, but you know who you are, that have that compassion to serve in God's name, to suffer with the root meaning of compassion and to bring God's tender care in the most difficult circumstances, you will experience renewal in your life when you take that step forward.

So, my point of renewal is, yes, it's good to get away sometimes, to get out of the heat so to speak, either literally or metaphorically, but the real renewal comes when you claim the role that God has given you and utilize the gifts that God has given. Then no matter what environment in which we live, we are people who are transformed by the love of God and not conformed to the ways of this world. Transformed to be agents of Christ's mission and glory - what a sense of renewal. No heat, no weather can overcome that. It is the true renewal from within. God be with you. Amen.