



Renewal for Life

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 6:25-33

January 31, 2016



Let's rewind to last Sunday. We were buried under a record snowfall. It was only the second time in my last 37 years that we cancelled Sunday worship.

I have one big take-away from last Sunday. We are not in control. Even the mega-powerful in our city were powerless against the elements. The guys operating snow plows became our heroes. It takes an epic blizzard to lay bare our control addiction. We overestimate our ability to control our circumstances.

The focus of this sermon is renewal. The reason is rather simple. I need renewal. You need renewal. We all need renewal. Scripture testifies time and again how much God's people need renewal.

This call to renewal started small in me. I was reading the Psalms. "Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:3, 7, 19). "Restore us again, O God of our salvation....Will you not revive us again...?" (Psalm 85:4, 6).

I communicated this longing for renewal with staff and Session. Our leaders began to sense with me that God is calling our church into a season of renewal.

Each year, at our annual meeting, I talk about the state of our church and speculate about our future ministry. Let's be honest, business meetings appeal to the hardcore among us. As we were making plans for this year's meeting, I decided I didn't want to speculate about our future ministry only with stakeholders. I wanted to talk about our future, especially as it relates to renewal, with everybody.

When I read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with renewal in mind, one verse leaps off the page: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you. Mt. 6.33

Jesus implores us to *seek*. Seek is spoken in present imperative, so the force of the word is *keep seeking*. God isn't playing hide and seek games with us; God wants to be found. Jesus says later in this sermon, "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Scripture promises, "If you seek the Lord with all your heart and soul, you will surely find him" (Deuteronomy 4:29; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Jeremiah 29:11-13; Hebrews 11:6).

Seek *first!* Make this seeking your first priority.

Seek first *His kingdom*. Each of us has a kingdom, a realm that is uniquely ours. I have two kingdoms: 1881 Cold Creek Court (my home address) and 124 Park Street (the church address). These are the two places where I exert some influence.

God's kingdom is far more cosmic. There's not one square inch of this world that doesn't belong to God. God declares, "Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool" (Isaiah 66:1). The Psalmist announces, "His kingdom will have no end" (145:13).

Jesus summons our allegiance to this most unusual kingdom. It has no standing army or geographical boundaries. Jesus speaks of a kingdom where the meek will inherit the earth and those persecuted for what they believe will be blessed.

But it would be a mistake to imagine this kingdom as something far away and out of this world. While Jesus' kingdom is not "of this world," it is expressly *for* this world. Jesus invites us to annex our little kingdoms (where we live and work/go to school) into his expansive kingdom.

Seek first His kingdom *and His righteousness*. Notice, we are not seeking our own righteousness. We are seeking Christ's imputed righteousness. Imputed is a fancy word for God crediting Christ's righteousness to our account.

Let's suppose God's righteousness requires a million dollars. But I don't have a million dollars' worth of righteousness to bring to the table. I only have a hundred dollars. So, God will count my hundred dollars as a million dollars, meaning his righteousness will be credited to my account. That's what God does in Christ. God imputes or credits Christ's righteousness to my life. Paul writes, "God made him [Christ] who knew no sin to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

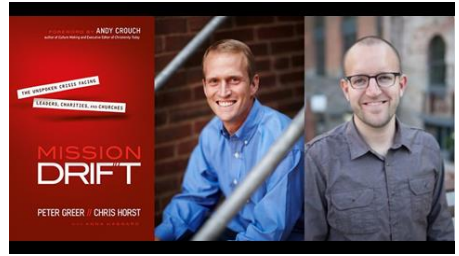
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Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness *and all these things will be given you*. Jesus speaks these words in the context of worrying about basic necessities, such as food and clothing (6:31). If we seek first Christ's kingdom and His righteousness, "all these things" that siphon away our best energies will be provided to us.

How do the poor react to these words of Jesus? How can they possibly seek first His kingdom when they lack basic necessities? If God's people who have ample amounts of food and clothing seek first His kingdom, we will take up

Christ's call to cloth the naked and feed the poor (Luke 12:33).

Mission Drift is a book written by two men who direct a Christian nonprofit called Hope International. A potential donor offered them an unprecedented amount of money on one condition: that they would tone down their Christian witness. Since receiving the gift would require them to compromise their mission, they turned it down.



Their book chronicles the all-too-common tendency in Christian nonprofits and faith-based institutions to drift from their founding mission. The drift happens slowly, almost imperceptibly at first. They cite the example of what happened to the YMCA. This Christian mission was established by 12 men in England in 1844. The YMCA was a ministry offering Bible studies and prayer groups for boys working in the slums of London. When it came to this country in the 1850s, it was a well-recognized Christian mission. The YMCA sent Christian missionaries throughout the world back in the day.



The YMCA's Christian identity is clearly evident in their original logo. The two Greek letters in the center, Chi Rho, is a common symbol for Christ. The Bible is opened to John 17:21, which references Jesus' words that his followers would all be one.

If you compare this founding YMCA logo to the one adopted in 2010, you will notice the only letter that remains is the "Y." Their founding Christian identity is



nowhere to be found. Today's "Y" has evolved into a family fitness center.



Mission drift is a real temptation for churches. We can drift from our original mission. The plight of our PCUSA denomination is due in large measure to mission drift. Let me take you back to *our* church's three core beliefs:

First: Jesus is Lord. God offers the world something absolutely unique in Jesus Christ found in no one else.

Second: Scripture is our authority. The Bible is our final arbiter in all matters of life and faith. We don't ask you to read the Bible primarily for information. God, through the Holy Spirit, uses Scripture to form Christ in us.

Third: Everyone is called to follow Jesus. This third core belief aligns with our central mission of "Becoming like Christ Together for the World."

So, what does this sermon on renewal have to do with my life? Three things:

1. Pray for renewal. Pray for revival in your life, my life and among God's people here. As I study Great Awakenings in American history, every revival is preceded by concerted prayer. No drive-by prayers get the job done; sustained prayer is the means by which God revives his people. We cannot manipulate or coerce revival. Yet, Scripture testifies repeatedly that God works cooperatively with human desire.

2. Practice the spiritual disciplines. We talk a lot about adopting a Spiritual Growth Plan or Rule of Life. We want you to be as intentional about your spiritual growth as you would an exercise regimen or a business plan. What do we need to do daily and weekly to become more like Christ together for the world? Incorporate into your daily routine the practice of prayer and Scripture meditation. Make Sunday worship and cultivating spiritual friends a part of your weekly schedule.



3. Participate with us in discerning the kind of church God wants us to become. Where is God calling us to marshal our resources to meet human need? Paul writes, “And this is our prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best” (Philippians 1:9-10).

I can't say for certain what is best for us. But let me share a few dreams that excite my imagination right now.

I dream about reaching more people for Jesus Christ—people of various ethnicities and backgrounds. I think about alternatives to our Sunday morning worship. A growing number of people work Sunday morning. Sunday AM is now prime time for youth sport leagues. How can we reach more people for Jesus Christ by expanding our ministry through worship?

I dream about planting new faith communities. We've planted three churches in the time I've been here. Let's do it again! Planting a new church is one of the best evangelistic strategies for new generations.

I dream about reaching our children and youth for Jesus Christ. When I talk this way, some of you push back. Hey,

what about making singles or seniors higher priority? Fine, let's do that also, but let's invest significant resources in reaching new generations for Jesus Christ.

Family/marriage ministry
ESOL ministry
World refugee crisis
Homeless & hypothermia efforts
Victims of abuse & human trafficking
Cunningham Park Elementary
Haiti & Cuba missions

I dream about taking on a few areas of unmet need near our church. What you see on your screen are unmet needs our Session and staff identified at our recent retreat. We want any mission we support to meet two criteria: that of fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission to go and make disciples (Matthew 28) and aligning with Jesus' Great Commandment of loving God and neighbor (Matthew 22).

All these dreams are predicated on a long-held belief of mine that God has big plans for this church; bigger plans than we have yet realized.

Our focus this year will be renewal: how God wants to renew me, renew you and renew this church. We'll be preaching about renewal. We'll be praying for renewal. We'll discern the kind of church God wants us to become. May this become an Acts 2:17 season when the words God speaks to His people on Pentecost come to pass in our church: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people; your sons and daughters will prophesy; your young will see visions and your old will dream dreams."