

“The Gift of Restoration”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Ephesians 2:13-22

December 2, 2023

Beloved friends, today I bring you a tale of transformation, a story that reflects the magnificent work of restoration we witness in our walk with Christ. This story is not from the ancient pages of scripture, but from the bustling streets of Charleston, SC. It's the story of The Ordinary, a restaurant, but more importantly, a vivid illustration of how Christ can renew and revitalize our lives. Imagine, if you will, a grand limestone-and-brick building from the 1920s, standing with a dignified aura on King Street. This building, originally a bank, was not just a structure of finance but a symbol of stability and trust. Yet, as the years rolled by, the once-bustling halls grew silent, the laughter and footsteps of its patrons a distant memory. The building, though majestic, slipped into a forgotten realm, much like the hidden corners of our hearts that we often neglect. Then came a vision, a dream born in the heart of Chef Mike Lata. Where others saw decay and obsolescence, Lata saw potential and vibrancy. He envisioned a place where the community could gather, not to exchange currency, but stories, laughter, and life. With passion and determination, he set about transforming this relic of the past into a beacon of the present. The transformation was not just physical, but symbolic. The old bank vault, once a keeper of worldly treasures, was repurposed as a gateway to culinary delights, connecting the main kitchen to the oyster bar. The towering windows and soaring ceiling, which once echoed with the clinks of coins, now bathed the restaurant in warm, inviting light, welcoming all who entered. This was not merely a renovation; it was a resurrection of purpose.

As we reflect on this story of The Ordinary, we are reminded of the dramatic change that faith in Jesus Christ brings into our lives. Just as the old bank was renewed into a thriving restaurant, our lives, when touched by Christ, undergo a profound transformation. The neglected and forgotten parts of our being are renewed with His love and grace. Where there was once decay, there blooms hope and purpose. Our spiritual journey mirrors the meticulous care and dedication seen in the restoration of The Ordinary. Just as Chef Lata and his team carefully preserved the historical essence while infusing new life into the building, Christ preserves our essence while breathing new life into our souls. He sees beyond our flaws and scars, recognizing our potential for beauty and purpose. As we journey through this sermon, let us meditate on the transformative power of Christ. Let us envision our lives as that grand old building, brimming with untold stories and waiting for the Master's touch to awaken our true purpose. In Christ, we are not just restored; we are remade, repurposed, and revitalized.

As we draw inspiration from the transformation of The Ordinary, our journey in faith mirrors this beautiful restoration. Just as this once-forgotten bank became a thriving hub of life and community, our walk with Christ leads us through a similar path of renewal. Imagine, if you will, our lives as an old, unused building. Through Christ, we undergo a remarkable transformation. We move from the old to the new, shedding our past and embracing a future filled with hope and purpose. This is not merely a change of habits, but a complete renewal of our being, akin to the rebirth of The Ordinary from a mere structure to a place of gathering and joy.

As we delve deeper, we see how Christ brings nourishment to the neglected parts of our souls. Just as The Ordinary transformed from a dormant state to a vibrant center of nourishment, in Christ, we find spiritual sustenance. He fills our once-empty spaces with His love, His Word, and His presence, much like the rich and diverse offerings of a well-prepared feast.

Lastly, we explore the shift from isolation to community. The Ordinary, now a symbol of togetherness, reflects our own journey into the spiritual family of Christ. We are woven into the tapestry of His community, where we share, grow, and find strength in fellowship – a far cry from the solitude of our previous lives. As we embark on this exploration of transformation in Christ, let us keep the vivid image of The Ordinary in our minds – a representation of the potential for renewal and revival that lies within each of us through the touch of the Master's hand. From the Old to the New. Just like that restaurant, God looks at us and makes the decision to renew us. We are, after all, His creatures to begin with. No matter how badly sins and the ways of this world have waylaid us, God's aim is always to see His creature's flourish.

As we explore the transformative journey from the old to the new, let's delve into the richness of Scripture, which eloquently speaks to this profound change. Each verse we examine not only stands as a beacon of hope but also connects deeply to the broader narrative of God's redemptive plan for us, much like the individual stories that stitch together the grand tapestry of The Ordinary's transformation.

First, we turn to **2 Corinthians 5:17**, a verse that succinctly captures the essence of our transformation in Christ. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* This verse isn't merely about change; it's about total renewal. Just as The Ordinary ceased to be just a building and became a center of community life, in Christ, we cease to be mere individuals defined by our past. We become new creations, reborn and redefined by our faith. The old life, with its sins and failures, is replaced by a new life filled with hope and purpose. It's a clear and powerful declaration of the transformative power of faith.

Then, in the Old Testament, we find a promise that beautifully complements this New Testament truth. In **Ezekiel 36:26**, God speaks of a transformation that is deeply personal and internal: *"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."* This verse speaks to the radical nature of the change God works in us. It's not just our actions that are transformed, but our very hearts. Like a skilled renovator taking a dilapidated building and restoring it to its former glory, God takes our stony, unresponsive hearts and makes them alive, responsive, and tender to His touch. This transformation of the heart is at the core of our journey from the old to the new.

Finally, we arrive at **Romans 12:2**, which brings an additional dimension to our understanding of transformation: *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* Here, the Apostle Paul urges us not to be shaped by the world's mold but to undergo a metamorphosis of the mind. This renewing of our minds is essential for discerning God's will. Just as a painter views a canvas with a vision of what it might become, God views us with a vision of what we can be. Our transformation is not just of the heart and spirit, but also of the mind - a complete overhaul that aligns us with God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.

In these scriptures, we see a holistic picture of transformation that encompasses our entire being – spirit, heart, and mind. Each verse, while powerful on its own, interweaves with the others to reveal the depth and breadth of what it means to be transformed in Christ. As we ponder these truths, let's remember the story of The Ordinary, a vivid example of how something old can be made wonderfully new, serving as a metaphor for the transformative work Christ does in each of us.

It reminds me of the story of Lance Brown. Lance's journey began with a career setback when he got laid off. Initially upset, he soon perceived this as a divine opportunity to use his art to serve and glorify God. He prayed for clear guidance on his path, seeking confirmation of God's plan for him. This confirmation came quickly when he was invited to paint at a youth retreat in Oklahoma, just days after his layoff. This opportunity was a clear sign for Lance that God had a new purpose for his art. Despite feeling nervous and out of his comfort zone, especially when faced with large groups, Lance trusted in God's plan. Before his performance, his friend Kae prayed over him, providing the strength and clarity he needed. This prayerful preparation allowed him to realize that his art was not about him, but about glorifying God. This understanding transformed his perspective and approach to his art. During a performance of his painting "Brokenness," Lance experienced a moment of crisis when his canvas began to fall off the easel. This incident, however, turned into a powerful and emotional experience, both for him and the audience. His portrayal of Jesus being beaten, symbolized through his painting, deeply moved the crowd. This experience not only brought Lance closer to God but also reaffirmed his faith and purpose in using art as a medium for spiritual expression. Lance's story is a testament to the transformative power of faith, demonstrating how a personal trial can lead to a renewed purpose aligned with God's will. His journey from a professional setback to becoming a vessel for God's message through art is a compelling narrative that resonates with the theme of transformation in Christ.

As we reflect on the profound transformation from the old to the new, illustrated both in Scripture and through the story of The Ordinary, we recognize that this transformation is more than just a

change in appearance or function. It is a deep, fundamental renewal of our very essence. In Christ, we are not merely renovated; we are reborn. Our identities, purposes, and hearts are made new, much like the rebirth of an old building into a vibrant, life-filled space. Yet, transformation is only the beginning of our journey. As we transition from the theme of renewal to that of sustenance, we enter the next phase of our spiritual evolution: "From Neglect to Nourishment." Just as a building, once restored, must be maintained and cared for, our spiritual lives require constant nourishment. If The Ordinary had been remodeled but left empty, it would soon fall back into disrepair. Similarly, our renewed spirits thrive only when nourished with God's Word, presence, and love. This next part of our sermon will explore how, in the wake of transformation, we are called to actively seek and embrace the spiritual nourishment that sustains and enriches our new life in Christ.

In our spiritual journey, the movement from neglect to nourishment is vividly captured in the scriptures. We see this transformative nourishment in two powerful verses that speak directly to our soul's sustenance. First, we find in **Matthew 4:4**, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" This scripture reminds us that just as our bodies need physical food, our souls require the nourishment of God's Word. It's a call to move beyond mere physical sustenance to a deeper, more sustaining spiritual nourishment. In the context of our theme, just as The Ordinary provides physical nourishment to its patrons, God's Word offers spiritual sustenance to us. This verse encourages us to feed not just our bodies but also our souls with the rich and life-giving words of God.

Then, in **John 6:35**, Jesus declares, "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*" Here, Christ is identifying Himself as the ultimate source of spiritual nourishment. Just as bread sustains physical life, Christ sustains spiritual life. He invites us to come to Him to satisfy our deepest spiritual hungers and thirsts. In the narrative of The Ordinary, imagine Christ as the chef who prepares not just meals for temporary satisfaction but offers a feast that fulfills our eternal hunger and thirst.

As we reflect on these scriptures, let us consider how we might be neglecting our spiritual nourishment. Are we feasting on the Word of God regularly? Are we coming to Jesus, the Bread of life, to satisfy our spiritual hunger? Just as a neglected building crumbles without care, our spiritual lives can wither without the nourishment of Christ's presence and God's Word. Let us, therefore, commit to a regular diet of scripture reading, prayer, and communion with Christ, ensuring that our spiritual lives are as well-nourished as our physical lives.

From isolation to community is just another way Christ restores us! In the transformative journey of faith, one of the most profound shifts we experience is the movement from isolation to community. Just as The Ordinary, once a solitary structure, transformed into a bustling center of community and fellowship, our walk with Christ leads us from the solitude of our individual struggles into the warmth and support of a spiritual family. This shift is beautifully encapsulated in Hebrews 10:24-25, which urges, "*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*" This scripture is a call to community, a reminder that our faith is not meant to be a solitary journey but a shared experience of growth, encouragement, and mutual edification.

In the context of The Ordinary, we see a physical manifestation of this scriptural truth. Where once there were empty halls and silence, now there is laughter, conversation, and the clinking of glasses. The transformation from a bank to a restaurant is a metaphor for our own spiritual transformation. Just as The Ordinary became a place where people gather, share life, and create memories, our lives in Christ become enriched and meaningful through our connections with others in the body of Christ. The story of The Ordinary also reflects the vital role of the church in our lives. The church is not just a building; it's a community of believers, a family united in Christ. It's where we find support, where we grow together, and where we serve one another in love. Just as the walls of The Ordinary hold within them stories of joy, celebration, and fellowship, the church holds our collective stories of faith, struggle and triumph.

In our individualistic society, the temptation to go it alone is strong. But Christ calls us to a different path – a path of community and connection. It is in the church that we find our spiritual family, where

we can bear one another's burdens (**Galatians 6:2**) and build each other up (**1 Thessalonians 5:11**). In this community, we find a place where we belong, where we can serve, and where we can grow.

As we journey through the transformative message of Advent, I'm reminded of a story that embodies the essence of the restoration we've been exploring. It's the story of a man named Brian, whose life journey remarkably parallels the spiritual renewal we find in Christ. Brian's story begins in the grips of a relentless addiction. Alcohol was his constant companion, a false friend that accompanied him from dawn till dusk. His life, much like the neglected violin we spoke of earlier, was in a state of disrepair, overshadowed by the haze of his addiction. His routine revolved around his next drink, rendering the rest of his world insignificant. Tragedy struck when Brian's sister, also battling alcoholism, suffered a severe accident. As her life hung in the balance, Brian, consumed by his addiction, found himself praying for her quick passing, not out of malice, but so he could return to his drinking. This moment, a heartbreaking reflection of his own brokenness, would later become a catalyst for his transformation. The turning point for Brian was as abrupt as it was profound. One ordinary morning, as he prepared for work with his usual six-pack breakfast, a moment of clarity broke through his alcoholic fog. In a symbolic act of defiance against his addiction, Brian discarded his beer and sought help. This action marked the beginning of his journey towards restoration – a journey from isolation to community, from despair to hope. But Brian's path was not without its trials. After leaving treatment, he was involved in a catastrophic car accident, one that he miraculously survived despite serious injuries. This accident, though a harrowing ordeal, brought him back to his wife, who welcomed him with open arms. It was in this period of forced stillness and recovery that Brian's life took another transformative turn. Confined to his home and with limited activities, Brian discovered a religious program that challenged his beliefs and prompted him to study the Bible. His initial skepticism gradually gave way to belief, and over time, Brian developed a deep, personal relationship with Christ. This newfound faith brought about a healing that went far beyond his physical injuries; it mended his broken spirit and filled his life with new purpose and meaning. As Brian's story unfolded, he found himself drawn to the community of believers. He reached out to a local pastor, humorously declaring his newfound faith and seeking guidance on his next steps. This led him to a small church where he found not just fellowship but a family in faith. The culmination of his journey was his baptism, coincidentally on the one-year anniversary of his sobriety – a divine affirmation of his transformation.

Dear friends, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, let Brian's story remind us of the profound restoration that Christ offers. His journey from a life marred by addiction to one filled with faith and community mirrors the transformation we all seek during this Advent season. Let us embrace the joy, peace, and renewal that Christ brings into our lives, and let us share these gifts with those around us. As we gather with our loved ones this Christmas, let's hold in our hearts the promise of restoration and the power of community. May the story of Brian inspire us to support each other in our individual journeys of faith and to celebrate the miraculous transformations that are possible through the grace of Christ.

Merry Christmas to all, and may the spirit of this season fill our hearts with endless joy and peace. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.