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Central Square
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Renewal

This part of our Sunday morning gathering, the sermon, as some of you already know, and some of you are learning, varies greatly here in style and subject from Sunday to Sunday. This is especially true over the summer: a sermon may be anything from classroom lecture style to – as it was last week, something that includes the serving of ice cream. This morning – I think of the sermon as something that is more like a couple of short stories.

I have always been a reader - biography, history, medicine, poetry; but over the past few months, it seems as though all I have been reading is mystery stories – nothing of any obvious depth or seriousness – though we could debate that point at another time... So when I walked into the bookstore in Oswego, and saw a non-fiction book with the title The Word Detective, it seemed like a perfect transition from casual reading to serious detection. The author, John Simpson, writes about some of his experiences and discoveries during his work with and for that monumental collection, The Oxford English Dictionary: a book, and series of books, about the history of words, what language, or languages, the English version is derived from, and the many uses and meanings that any given word may have had, been renewed, over the centuries. So a connection of sorts with my choice of the word “renewal” as title for today's sermon. Or talk. (And as some of you know, I hate having to invent titles for sermons...)

It was the summer after I was in fifth or sixth grade, that I began working, shelving books in my local library. So my first thoughtful connection to the word “renewal” was, understandably, something that had to do with books, as in: “Your book is overdue; you have to renew it.” But there are countless other kinds of renewals: car registrations, wedding vows, re-potting houseplants, birthdays – and other holidays: just this past week I got in the mail two sets of holiday card samples from which I can order. Not what I want to think about in July. Or even August. But what I am inviting us all to do this morning is to begin to explore the idea of renewal in many of the places in our lives – even, or maybe especially, those that we don't often consciously think about.

And because we are here, in this place, this room, let us consider the church as a place – a location – where we can think about a renewal; question it, ask about it,

and from time to time, feel it; feel renewal. To separate ourselves, for some minutes, from the very real and necessary calls of laundry, grocery shopping, mowing the lawn, paying the bills – except the church bills, of course! No – even those, set aside for an hour.

Renewal. Sometimes, maybe often, we like to think of renewal as a gift, something that comes to us unbidden – but – look around – the renewal in this room, the newly – painted walls and ceiling came about because of work, not just the wishes and daydreams that preceded the very real buckets and brushes – and the people using them. Renewal: preceded by thought and effort.

OK, a story of sorts. A couple of Saturday nights ago, there was a long, loud, and late party in one of the other apartments in my building. Lying awake in bed I got to imagining a conversation between me and one of the party-goers – an alternative to getting out of bed and kicking down their door...

Me: “Be quiet, I have to sleep so I can go to church tomorrow.”

Party-goer: “I don't go to church. I don't believe in God.”

Me: “You can believe in God anywhere. In fact, if you believe in God, you have to believe in God wherever and everywhere you go. God is not a three-dimensional object that you can pick up and put down whenever you find it convenient.” (like, I could nastily add, your beer can)

Party-goer: “Then why go to church?”

The response, or perhaps answer, to the party-goer's question, goes back to the word “renewal.” Church as a place to renew, and keep renewing, as difficult as it often is, our belief in, our desire for, the essential goodness of humankind. In spite of loud parties, and thoughtless party-goers.

To take deliberate, conscious, time to renew our ever on-going desires to see justice done; to see and experience racial equality – and in the words of Martin Luther King, “White Americans stopped murder, but that is not the same thing as ordaining brotherhood; nor is the ending of lynch rule the same thing as inaugurating justice.” Church as a place where we can renew our strength – and sometimes, to be absolutely honest, our desire to take one more step toward healing. And not just in the big public ways, but in the daily dealings and connections with all those with whom we meet – whether storekeepers, garbage collectors, and maybe hardest of all, those with whom we live. And in all

seriousness, the four-legged as well as the two-legged companions.

Renew, also, our understanding of that all-purpose four-letter word, “love” - not romantic love, but a broader love, as when we here weekly repeat “love is the doctrine of this church.” Love as a broad sense of deep respect and appreciation and broadly understood, if we will it so, allow it to be so, the word “love” can help us come to include an understanding of why people act and speak as they do - not for us always to approve of, or agree with them, but to learn. Even here, in this wished - to - be - perfect place, we don't all agree with each other on any number of subjects or issues. Again, “love is the doctrine of this church” we say weekly, in unison -and the word “doctrine,” according to my dictionary, refers to teaching, to something that is taught. Which suggests to me that if it is something taught, it is also something always to be learned. And re-learned. And re-learned. We are never perfect. But we can - should - we must - renew our working love.

Back for a moment to the Party-goer...Church, I would have said to him, is a place where you can share your ideas and hopes and thoughts, and not yell about them in the hallway at one o'clock in the morning. “Okay,” then says the Party-goer, “but if you don't believe in God, will you then go to hell, and not to heaven?” My current thought is that we have quite enough hell right here on earth, and don't need more - but my idea of what I'd like heaven to be, I just had, you could say, a renewal experience. I'll tell you my story, but you may have had, or will have, one like it. A few weeks ago, I was helping a friend at the book sale at her Oswego church. The table was set up, arranged and designated by subject. On the table labelled “religion,” I saw a book with the author's name, Edgar Jackson. When I was growing up, downstate in Mamaroneck, my father had a friend, a Methodist minister by the name of Edgar Jackson. Could this be the same person? I brought the book home - title, Pastoral Counseling - and as I went to put it on the shelf, I realized that I already had one of Jackson's books - and I could see that it had belonged to my father - it had his bookplate in it. One of my computer-savvy daughters did the necessary research, and reading what she had printed out and sent to me - yes, the author was the same person, my father's friend.

So how, you may well wonder, does this story connect with thoughts or ideas about heaven? I'd never given a lot of thought to heaven - there are as many thoughts and ideas about it as there are people - including whether or not heaven is even there - wherever “there” might be - above the clouds, or in another

universe. But I've given some thought to what I'd like heaven to be – to renew it in my mind, you might say – heaven as a place to renew and restore relationships. Imagining my father and his friend continuing their conversation, their combined Methodist and Humanist friendship. Heaven, a place where all people can simply meet again, and say to each other, “Oh, now I understand.” Now I can care freely. Without the old restrictions that we are so used to, and the long historic social border lines of race, or age, or money, gender, educational level, and our childhood quarrels. And if heaven is a place where relationships are reconnected and renewed, does that mean – can that mean – that we from time to time, are able to make the real heaven to be not in the sky but here in our imperfect living life times?

Thus, every day may offer us an opportunity for renewal. That doesn't mean that something renewed, renewable, will clearly happen every day to, or for every person. But I like to think of renewal as kind of a window: if you don't – or won't – open it, the fresh air cannot come in. Maybe coming here, coming to church, is like the window and the fresh air; if you don't come, you will miss an opportunity for the fresh air of a renewal – one among many – even the briefest of drafts, a moment, an idea. And to be open in other places and ways as well; to feel a moment of renewal in unexpected places.

A last story: I read that hundreds of trees have recently been planted in Fulton and Oswego since last fall, and 88 of those trees, according to a newspaper clipping, are along Schuyler Street, one of the streets next to where I live. Around the base of each tree is wrapped something green – a rubber sheet sort of thing. Some of the wraps have words printed on them – the name of a company: “Professional Tree Establishment System,” if I am reading it correctly through the folded wraps. But some of the wraps also have a second notice on them: the green rubber wrap also says “I'll be removed after I've taught this tree how to live on its own.” Teaching. Learning. Renewing. The message for all life, now and may it be, on-going and forever.