

SCREEN: Rebuilt book image

Last week St. Pius celebrated the 6th anniversary of our renewal plan based on the book Rebuilt.

And if you are a visitor or guest or returning to church after some time away, welcome! This plan is for you.

For those of you who are new to the parish or need a refresher, Rebuilt tells the story of Nativity Catholic Church in Timonium Maryland.

They were a parish struggling with declining attendance and bored, unhappy members. A parish that had lost its way and become irrelevant.

The pastor and associate began visiting successful, growing churches and brought their strategies to Nativity.

It took ten years, but Nativity has tripled it's attendance and last year dedicated a brand new church building.

They did this by redirecting the mission of their church to reaching out to make disciples.

When I read their story in 2013,

I felt energized with might be possible for our parish.

St. Pius wasn't dying, but like many suburban parishes, we were in decline.

From 2000-2008 our weekly attendance dropped 40%.

We needed to do something, something bold.

For several months the staff and I prayed about it, and discussed ways to renew St. Pius.

We knew the risks involved.

We worried that changes could drive people away, but we decided that unless we were willing to try new things, we'd never know what was possible.

We introduced many changes, including preaching in series.

One big change for me personally was stepping away from the pulpit to begin my homily.

That may not seem like a big deal, but I hadn't done it before...not at a weekend Mass.

I'd become very comfortable with my preaching routine.

Right up until the moment I first walked away from the pulpit,

I debated doing it.

See, I didn't want to fail.

I thought, *"I can just play it safe, stick with what I've been doing, no one will know."*

But I'd know and so I walked out to here....

then down to here...and haven't looked back.

I'm guessing you've had moments when you had to choose

between trying something new and playing it safe.

Might have been with a job, or trying out for something at school,

or maybe with a relationship.

Maybe it was joining a ministry, or small group or serving in a mission activity.

Like me, you had to balance the excitement of trying something new

with the fear of failing.

SCREEN: light bulb

Here's a great quote from Thomas Edison, the famous inventor.

Edison said:

Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how

close to success they were when they gave up.

Edison also said this, *I've never failed, I just found 10,000 ways that didn't work.*

Whenever we get close to success then give up it's usually because

we decide to play it safe.

SCREEN: Everybody Always main screen

This is week three of our Lenten message series titled, Everybody Always,

based on the book by Bob Goff.

It's his take on Jesus' commandment that we must love *'everybody always'*.

Today we are hearing that when it comes to loving like Jesus,

none of us can afford to play it safe.

Let's turn to the readings.

The scriptures give us amazing examples of God asking individuals to step outside their comfort zone and go someplace new.

SCREEN: Moses and burning bush

In our first reading today, Moses was meeting God for the first time.

Now at this point in his life, Moses was essentially a nobody; a simple shepherd, tending his father-in-law's flock.

Then one day God appeared in a burning bush and said to Moses:

I want you to go to Egypt and free my people from bondage.

Moses could have said to God,

Thanks, but no thanks.

I'm just a shepherd, I have no qualifications to be a leader,

it's better for me to stay right here where it's safe and keep doing what I've always done.

But Moses didn't.

He was willing to answer God's call and became the leader of the Israelites, the Chosen People.

He led them out of Egypt through the Red Sea and to the Promised Land.

Again and again in scripture God asks individuals to do something new; go someplace different for a greater purpose and a divine mission.

Think of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets.

Think of Mary, and Joseph, and the Apostles.

They all had to face their fears; they all had questions and doubts.

But because they said "yes", because they were willing to trust and believe in God's vision for their lives, they could do the impossible.

God could use them for His purpose.

SCREEN: Fig tree

When Jesus told the parable of the fig tree,

he was saying that every disciple must accept his or her calling in life.

A disciple is someone who produces fruit for God's Kingdom.

Disciples who fail to grow, don't produce fruit; then they're good for nothing.

The same is true for us.

Every single day God is calling us to grow like the fig tree; to deepen our roots and extend our branches so His Kingdom grows.

This Lent we are focusing on Jesus' call to love everybody always.

We're specifically looking at the people God has placed in our lives, our neighbors, as the ones God wants us to reach.

When it comes to our neighbors, the tendency for most people is to play it safe.

And that's because we're told to only love those who look like us, talk like us and worship like us.

Everyone else is a stranger, possibly an enemy.

We're told to only love those who love us back, and only to the same degree that they love us.

When it comes to people beyond our family and friends, we've been conditioned to ask,

"What do I get out of this relationship?" What's in it for me?"

But not Jesus.

He considered everyone his neighbor.

He refused to allow his culture or religious customs keep him from loving others.

He never played it safe; he loved sinners and tax collectors and Gentiles.

He brought into his family those who were on the margins of society.

Through his miracles and teachings and acts of compassion Jesus loved those who could never repay his love.

After all, how does a leper repay the man who heals him?

Or a prostitute return the love of one who loves freely & unconditionally?

How could a tax collector thank someone who accepts him as a friend?

They can't!

All they could do was love as Jesus loved.

All they could do was love everybody always.

And so must we.

SCREEN: blank red background

The reason we don't do this as often as we should might be because we've been hurt by the people closest to us.

Maybe you've been hurt by a family member, a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor or parishioner.

You've been disappointed by someone you loved who didn't live up to your expectations. Sooner or later, we all find ourselves in this situation.

And the challenge is to keep loving, keep reaching out and not allow the pain and hurt keep us from loving like Christ.

So what can help you love everybody always?

One way is to reflect on how generous God is in loving you.

God loves you always.

It's the only reason you're here now.

You didn't earn your way into the Kingdom of God.

You didn't buy your way in.

God's love of you is a total gift.

Reflect on this daily, meditate on it often, pray in thanksgiving for God's love of you everyday and never lose sight of it.

Don't ever delude yourself into thinking you are saved by your own merit.

You and I and every baptized person are only saved by the generous, unearned, unconditional love of God.

And you have to get this truth, really get it and make it a core belief of your faith before you can really love everybody always.

And the best way to get better at loving like Jesus is by practicing this love everyday.

God has placed people in your life that he wants you to love like Jesus.

As I said on week one of this series, you don't have to cross an ocean to love your neighbor, sometimes all you have to do is cross the street.

But so many people these days don't know their neighbors, don't talk with them, so they never get close.

They play it safe and in staying where it is safe,

God's plans and purposes are frustrated.

Don't play it safe.

Don't hold back with your neighbors.

Be willing to step outside your comfort zone as hard as it is.

Sometimes a simple 'hi', a wave, a phone call or an invitation is all that is needed to begin a conversation and lead someone in a new direction.

This week, be willing to take that step with someone God has placed in your life.

Make the first move and trust that God is with you.

When I look back over the past six years, I'm in awe of all that

God has accomplished through us at St. Pius X Church.

The hundreds of new families who've joined us.

The Bowie Bobs and Barbs who've returned to church.

The adults stepping into a small group, a ministry or into mission.

Renewal isn't easy, it can be scary.

But with God at our side, all things are possible.

This Lent, allow God to help you take a step in a new direction;

a step to loving everybody always. Amen. +