

***Cultivating Resistant, Resilient and Renovative
Christian Community***
Philippians 2: 12-16

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**April 25, AD 2021
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We're in the middle of taking three Sundays to do some thematic sermons. Last week we took notice of the kinds of questions our graduating seniors are asking. Next week, we'll look at ways we can worship better. Today, we're homing in on our church's vision for ministry and mission. Of course in many ways, the mission of the church never changes. A century from now, pressing deeper into Christ and reaching further into the world will still be an energizing, relevant mission. Jesus Christ and his gospel never change. But times *do* change. Priorities in a culture morph according to trends. So the church has to restate the enduring gospel in ever creative ways to address the current world. Let's start with a look at our passage from Philippians.



If there had been bicycles back in his day, Paul could have used bike pedals as a great visual. When you press one pedal down, the other one goes up. When you press that second pedal down, the first pedal goes up. You alternate pushing the pedals to make the whole bike go.

These are the pedals on Paul's bike of discipleship. *God works as we work. We work as God works.* Pedal 1: God is at work in you, to make you willing and able to serve him. So, press down on that pedal! Push into Christ by your faith. That will raise up Pedal 2: Work out own your salvation. Is Paul saying we can save ourselves? Of course not. But once God has been at work in us, we can respond with working *out* our salvation in vibrant mission to the world. God works, so we can work. As we work--as we worship, love, serve and extend ourselves--God works in us even more. So the bike of discipleship rolls.



Next, Paul pictures us as shining light in a dark culture. “In the midst of a crooked and twisted generation...you shine as lights in the world.” An energized church generates light to illumine those languishing in darkness. Paul then uses a phrase that can be read two ways. We are holding fast *to* the Word of life in order to be lights in the dark. We press into Christ our source of light. But also, we

hold *forth* the Word of life, beaming the light of Christ out towards others, to guide home the lost. God shines in our hearts precisely so we can shine his light towards others. As we do uncover the light of our hope and beam it forward, God fills us with more of his marvelous light. This idea of discipleship and mission, pressing down and reaching out, is foundational to the Scriptural purpose of God’s people.

But how can we frame our mission in a way that speaks to both the threat and opportunity of being Christians today? This year I have been working with the elders on a fresh statement of our ancient vision. Our purpose is to cultivate resistant, resilient, and renovative Christian community which radiates from the heart of Baton Rouge. Let’s work through each of those words.



Resistant: to be immune or impervious to the alien worldviews of a post Christian culture. To discern and work against life-shaping (and life-depleting) practices such as excessive individualism in which the expression

of my personal identity is the only thing that matters, whether it’s my dream to be a Disney princess or a drag queen. Or, cultural Marxism in which identifying and dismantling those perceived as oppressors of my identity becomes the purpose of life.

I Peter 5 tells us, “Be sober minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.” Peter tells us to clear our heads and be alert. Because we definitely have an adversary. The *diabolos*, the one who deceives, slanders and accuses. Now you won’t see him dressed up in a red devil suit. Nor even in a lion’s costume, even though he is a devouring beast. He is the power of deceit. He operates like invisible poison gas that we breathe in, distorting our perceptions, making us think that wrong is right and right is wrong. He wants to

eat us up with lies. Lies about ourselves. Lies about our worth—either too high or too low. Lies about what makes for human flourishing. The form of the lies may change through the years, but they are always the same. *To make us doubt God and exalt ourselves.*

Peter tells us quite simply. Resist him. The word he uses literally means “stand against.” Stand up to him. Tell the truth. Shine a light. Don’t go along to get along. Look at the misery in the world and weep over it. Look at the lies people believe and let your heart break. Let your righteous anger rise. Then tell the truth:

- I don’t belong to myself but to my faithful Creator.
- The money and resources I have earned beyond survival are not first for my pleasure and entertainment but for God’s work and glory.
- Destroying a life inside a womb is never a human right. Follow the science: from conception life is life. And life is sacred.
- It is more important that I form my children in Christ than in winning the world’s game.
- Going to war with my body over my biology will never lead to flourishing. I need to make psychological and spiritual peace with my genetics.
- Wanton violence and theft is never a solution to injustice; it just makes it worse. The even rule of law protects us all.
- The goal of my life is not fulfillment through personal expression; the goal of my life is love toward God and others through sacrifice.
- So, the purpose of life is not as much about feeling good as *doing* good.

A resistant Christian community rehearses the truth so that we are not deceived. We come here to breathe the air of the Kingdom of God and remember what is so. We speak truth and we practice truth. Over time, then, members of a resistant Christian community learn to see challenges to the faith for what they are. We don’t freak out when we are opposed. We learn the forms in which our opposition usually comes. So we are able calmly to apply Christian truth. In healthy resistant communities, Christian *distinction* is embraced and celebrated. The Christian worldview is known and clearly expressed, rehearsed and enacted. Alternate worldviews are discerned and explained so that we understand the distinction. Church members become trained analysts: able to discern competing worldviews and evaluate them. We learn to recognize lies, expose them and refuse them. We stand together in solidarity for the faith once for all delivered to us.

As your elders discussed being a resistant Christian community, we highlighted how important children’s and youth ministry are. We want to partner

with parents in forming our children in Christ. We want to offer loving, engaging teaching of the big story of God's dealings with the world and how he redeemed us in Jesus. We want to embolden our families to be distinctive in belief and practice. And we want to challenge our families that teaching the Word is first and foremost the responsibility of parents. We've got to make hard choices with our time and our intentionality if our children are going to be able to resist the tsunami of hostile, destructive values all around them.

We also discussed how crucial it is that we each learn to express what Christ means to us. Resistant communities are filled with people who can say, "This is what Jesus has done for me. This is why I follow him and submit to him. This is the way I have found to life and health and peace." There is a high emphasis on members being able to make vibrant personal testimony so that it can be seen how *lived experience and historic Christian teaching sync up*.



Resilient: tending to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. So resilient communities are capable of withstanding shock without permanent deformation or rupture. Living in South Louisiana, we know something about resilience. We send out the Cajun Navy when the city floods. We rebuild relationships across races after a summer of violence. We rebuild homes, months after the world has forgotten the storms that scrambled us.

Resilient Christian communities can thrive even in times of deprivation, disaster or hostile attacks. They are able to respond in generosity, clarity and love. Such resilience, of course, doesn't just happen. Resilience arises from years of sinking roots deep into Christ and into one another's lives. Our strength arises from habit, the habit of regular, robust gathered worship. It's so good we're coming back together. The church rebounds, and it takes all of us to do that. We cultivate resilience through dedicated discipleship. If you want the strength of God's Word in tough times, it's essential to learn and meditate on his Word when you're not in crisis.

Now here's an interesting paradox. Resilience doesn't strengthen only through working on ourselves. In fact, a self-focused church is extremely vulnerable to in-fighting, easily frightened by external opposition, and readily wilts in crisis. A church gets resiliently healthy when it pursues vigorous, sacrificial

ministries of compassion for our own and our community. Our reaching out and expending ourselves with time, effort and funding all make us spiritually resilient.

In particular, Peter reminds us of how important it is to be in solidarity with other Christians throughout the world: “Resist [the devil], firm in your faith, knowing that *the same kinds of suffering* are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.” We are not alone in feeling at odds with the world. We are not alone when our light is resented by the darkness. American Christians now face more opposition than at any time in our history. That’s new to us. But it’s not new to most of Christ’s people in most places. We may well be told that we are purveyors of hate, part of the problem, indeed a threat to people’s freedom. Now we have a taste of what our fellow Christians in Sudan, or China, or Iran have undergone for years. Andrew Brunson is a minister in our denomination. He resides now in Montreat, North Carolina. He has a Ph.D in New Testament studies. He’s a normal, American Presbyterian. So when he was imprisoned in Turkey for two years, it suddenly got very real for all of us. Andrew lived the persecution that millions of Christians live. He found great solace in the faith of the persecuted church. It gave him strength to know he joined a great company of believers who endured and eventually flourished in joy under extreme pressure. How we find resilience as Christians in a hostile world? We remember those who are persecuted. We stand with them in prayer and gratitude. They are real people with hopes and dreams like us. We make the connection that we join the world church in shining light in a dark world.



Renovative: bringing about renewal and restoration, tending to refresh and reinvigorate. Renovative Christian communities refresh their members who labor in the stress and conflict of the culture. Renovative worship provides a reset for the soul with the recollection of the one, true story of Jesus Christ which breathes hope into everything. Renovative Christian communities, restored by worship, study and fellowship, move intentionally and vigorously into their broader community with ministries of healing and hope. Such Christians come alongside others, especially those in need, in such a way that burdens are shared and possibilities for flourishing opened.

I love the way that the ministry and mission of our church occurs through partnerships. We partner with more than thirty other ministries and missionaries to do gospel work. And these ministries have a common heartbeat. We don’t want to

reach from the top down, but to come alongside. We don't want just to do ministry to people, giving a meal or a blanket and nothing else. Rather, we want to encourage folks in their rising towards self-sufficiency, wholeness and opportunity. For example, we don't give away houses. But through Habitat we labor alongside the new home owner to construct the dwelling. We teach the family how to be responsible for owning a home. Jobs training through Christian Outreach Center opens doors for people to get work so they can move from deflating dependency to independence. Mentoring programs come alongside children and their families to encourage education, respect, and a loving home life. We help to break the cycle of poverty one family at a time. I love Dustin Lafont's vision at Front Yard bikes: he teaches the kids that once stole his bike how to work on bikes and earn their own bike. Now he employs them at Mid-City bike shop, running a business even as they come to know Christ. That's renovation.

As you know, we are deeply committed to the Gardere Community Christian School and to the Church of the Resurrection in New Orleans. NOLA is one of the toughest mission fields, and our church plant is reaching the lost with the gospel. Our elders have committed significant funding to Gardere and Church of the Resurrection for the next three years. That's for operations. But I believe we will be called to do more. Gardere is going to need a new building. Church of the Resurrection will soon be ready to purchase and renovate one of the empty churches in New Orleans. Bethany Alliance in Uganda needs more space to house orphans, and Brian Miller in Medellin needs more space for girls coming out of sex trafficking. We can help. I'll be encouraging our elders to plan a significant capital campaign to break ground on taking these mission partners to the next level. That means asking each one of us to step forward with significant over and above giving. Imagine a church that undertakes a capital campaign not for our own buildings but for buildings that advance the gospel in our city and world.

Paul urges us to work out the implications of the salvation God has given us in Jesus. For it's quite a miracle: God has been at work in you. He's been stirring in your heart to make you willing. He's been working in your life to give you time, resources, passions to do mighty things for his glory. Because we have been given the light of life. So we shine as stars in a dark world. We're called to cultivate being a community that is *resistant* to the world's deception and bright with the truth of Jesus. We're called to foster *resilient* community so we can know we stand together in Baton Rouge but also around the world with every believer who suffers under the pressure of the world's darkness. That unity enables us to rise joyfully even amidst opposition. And we are called to energize a *renovative* community that comes alongside others to open opportunity to the gospel and a flourishing life. Let's go!