

Message: “Renewed by Love”

What do we do when life isn’t easy? Esperanza and I had brunch with close friends last weekend. During our conversation, we realized all four of us were going through major life changes. We’re all trying to manage great stress. This shifted our conversation. We embraced the grace given by, and received from, God and each other. We were renewed by love.

All of us are facing major life changes and stress. We’re in a period of collective trauma. The causes include war, death, cancer, job changes, relationship shifts, violence, financial problems, racism, oppression, food insecurity, health concerns, and the list goes on and on.

Paul tells us to have courage. We can be assured God’s love will carry us through. But this is much easier to say than it is to live. The lesson he offers to the congregation in Rome is much like the one James shares. Through trials and suffering we learn endurance. And endurance builds character, as we get a glimpse of God’s character. This renews us and gives us hope.

With your indulgence, I’d like to explore this development process a bit. Let’s see how we can find hope and be renewed.

Have you ever heard the expression, “a canary in a coal mine?”

I’m not talking about the song by Sting. In the early 20th century, coal miners took caged canaries with them into the mines. If the birds became sick or died from toxic fumes, it was a signal for miners to immediately evacuate.

Today, it describes anything which signals trouble before it affects us on a broad scale. For example, rising Arctic temperatures are a sign of pending climate change. Disagreements between leaders or between members of a household can lead to conflict.

Our feelings and emotions send us signals, if we’re willing to pay attention to them. Let’s explore this.

Have you noticed your tolerance isn’t what it used to be?

“It’s not anger, not meltdowns, just less room. Less patience for noise, less patience for chaos. Less patience for people who take and take and never notice. We leave a conversation and feel oddly depleted. We agree to do something small and feel strangely resentful.

And it can be confusing, because from the outside, life may look relatively stable. We aren't in a crisis. We aren't falling apart. But internally, our margin is thinner. We feel different.

So, the question becomes, 'Why does everything feel just a little more irritating than it used to?' Let's talk about what's actually happening, because this isn't random and it isn't a personality flaw.

It shows up in ordinary ways. Perhaps you get a text from a friend, asking for a favor, and your first reaction isn't generosity, it's fatigue. Or someone talks over you, and instead of letting it go, you feel it in your chest. Or a family member repeats the pattern they've had for years and suddenly, you just don't have the bandwidth to smooth it over anymore.

Nothing huge has happened. But we're acting like it's one thing too many. A lot of us quietly think, 'Why am I getting so irritable?', 'Why am I less flexible?' and 'Why does everything feel louder?'"¹

Here's a key point: most of us build our adult lives to have tolerance. We tolerate discomfort. We tolerate taking. We tolerate all the dynamics that don't fully work for us because we're building lives, raising families, keeping the peace, holding everything together. This level of tolerance serves a purpose, but we aren't meant to do it on our own.

Our lives change. In our 20s and 30s, we focus on doing. We push, perform, achieve, and hold it together. We override a lot. And by the time we reach our 40s and 50s, something shifts. Not dramatically, quietly. This pattern continues when we reach our 70s, 80s and 90s.

We start asking, "What is good?" and "What is sustainable?" This isn't weakness. It's realignment. Research on lifespan development shows our brains become less interested in approval and more interested in meaning, emotional honesty and faith as we grow.

What changes? Our tolerance for misalignment drops. Not because we're becoming more difficult, but because we're becoming honest about what drains us. The things we once absorbed without noticing begin to register. Not because they got worse, but because we stopped numbing them out. We're aligning to God and want our lives to as well.

¹Material drawn from *Canaries in a Coal Mine*, <https://www.thecanariesinthecoalmine.com/reflection/s>

There's also a reality we need to recognize. As we get older, pressure begins to stack up. Career demands, aging parents, teenage kids, adult children or grandchildren, health awareness and time awareness all add up. We are carrying more. And if we aren't caring for, and nourishing our inner selves, we have less internal padding and support.

The part we don't talk about often is this: early in life, many of us learn to tolerate a whole lot. We became the flexible one, the accommodating one, the one who keeps the peace. There's nothing wrong with being this way.

Jesus taught us to love and carry each other's burdens. But when we do it alone, holding our stress in and never finding a way to release the pressure, it becomes unhealthy. At some point, we start saying, "We can't keep absorbing at this level."

So, when we're irritable, it's a sign, like a canary in a coal mine. It's not that something is wrong with us, but we need to realign. We need to renew ourselves with something, or someone, greater, a higher power. We need to know it's okay to feel stressed, less tolerant and more emotional. We need to know we're loved unconditionally and cared for. Those close to us help, but only God knows it all. And only God's grace and mercy truly pardon and heal.

How does realignment work and what can we do? We don't need strong attitudes or actions. We don't need to blow up our lives, or the lives of our family, friends or neighbors. We do need to get curious.

Where is our energy, our love and passion, going? Where do we feel drained? Are we still operating on a level that no longer fits who we are?

Here are some practical tips to help. First, notice patterns. What consistently leaves you depleted? Maybe it's time to make different choices. Ask "What gives me energy?" instead. Second, stop auto-agreeing. Give yourself a pause before saying "yes." Third, adjust in small, honest ways. No big shifts. Leave earlier. Speak a little more directly. Protect a little more space. Care simply.

Finally, feed your inner being, your soul. Take walks with God. Try a daily devotional. Give contemplative prayer a chance. Spend some time sharing your experiences of God with friends. Say it out loud!

When our tolerance drops, it's not a call to withdraw from life.

It's a call to participate in it more honestly. If everything feels a little more irritating lately, you aren't broken. You aren't becoming negative. You aren't turning into someone you don't recognize.

You are adjusting to a new stage, a different, and perhaps difficult, period of life. One where honesty matters. So, if your tolerance is lower than it used to be, maybe that's not a problem. Maybe it's a signal. Maybe it's the beginning of living in a way that fits the person you are now. Maybe we're ready to be renewed by God's love.

This is how we can love ourselves. We're tapping into the way God loves us. And the beautiful and joyful part of it is this: what you experience and learn changes the way you interact with, and see, the people around you. I think this helps our relationships become more authentic and loving.

You see, I think many of us quietly assume other people know how to love better than we do. We watch other families, other marriages, other friendships and think, "They must have received a manual we somehow missed."² Love seems to move more naturally for them. Less effort. Less confusion.

TV shows and movies don't help. Social media gives us a false sense of reality, because what we see is often carefully curated. What we rarely consider is what love means.

If we didn't grow up feeling emotionally seen, heard or protected, it makes sense closeness feels complicated. When our nervous system learns connection can be unpredictable, we stay alert. We scan. We brace. Love doesn't feel easy. It feels like work.

God's love is easy. It's freely offered. All we need to do is accept it, soak it up and let us nourish us. Love then begins to change us, one baby step at a time, from the inside out.

This isn't self-improvement. It's recognition. The moment we quietly realize and accept God's love for what it is, something shifts. Our heart softens. We have an "ah, ha" moment. We realize our views and reactions are shaped by outer experiences, not by deficiency within us.

²Material drawn from <https://www.thecanariesinthecoalmine.com/blogs/love-feels-different-when-we-feel-safe>

Knowing God sees you and loves you for who you are carries weight.

It steadies us. It tells us our internal world is real and valid. Over time, this recognition becomes the foundation for a different kind, a greater kind of love. Not dramatic. Not performative. But present.

Love, in its healthiest form, isn't about perfection, about getting all the details exactly right. It is about consistency. It is about staying in the room when things feel uncomfortable. It is about responding rather than withdrawing.

As we learn to offer ourselves with the same steadiness, the same love, something old begins to settle, to change, to be renewed, to realign. The part of us that once felt too much or not enough no longer has to prove anything.

This is how love grows. Not all at once. But with faith, hope and time.

Let us pray ...

Romans 5:1-5 (CEB)

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.