PURSUE EXCELLENCE

**Notes at the Door (Part 4) | Philippians 4:7-9**

If you are just joining us this morning, we are in a series we’re calling NOTES AT THE DOOR. Each week I’ve been offering some parting pastoral posts that I hope will be helpful for you as I prepare to leave in late January and this church moves forward into its next era. There’s no doubt in my mind that the health of this church in the past, present and future depends first and foremost on the favor of God. I believe, however, that the deliberate decision of this congregation and its leaders to live by the principles and practices I’ve described thus far helps to explain why during a nearly sixty-year history -- when so many Christian churches have struggled, divided or died out -- Christ Church has kept going and growing.

I want to stress, however, that the ideas I’ve offered in this series are not just for this church. They are ways of thinking and acting that I hope will be useful to each of you in your approach to your family, to your career, and to all of the contexts of your daily life. That’s also true of the note I want to post today. I pray that wherever you are and whatever you do, you will PURSUE EXCELLENCE.

When I was growing up, there was a sizable oil painting that hung above the fireplace in our den. The painting depicted the Great Seal of the State of New York. The painter had rendered it with considerably more subtlety and elegance than this depiction but the essence is the same. In the center of the Great Seal was a lofty mountain topped by a glorious sun. Flanking the mountain are two women representing Liberty and Justice. And beneath it all is emblazoned the one-word motto -- “***EXCELSIOR***” -- a Latin word that has been variously translated as meaning “higher” or “more elevated” or even “ever upward.” It’s the term from which we get our English words “excel” and “excellent.”

I wonder if the person who devised that motto for the State of New York knew that she or he wasechoing one of the ancient mottos of the Kingdom of God.Thousands of years before I laid my eyes on that painting above the mantlepiece in my home, the Apostle Paul left some NOTES AT THE DOOR for the Philippian Church – a people whom biblical scholars suggest were Paul’s favorites among all the congregations he had served. In the last chapter of his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes this: **FINALLY, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is EXCELLENT or praiseworthy—think about such things.** In other words, dear friends, raise your sights higher than the normal horizon. Seek a more elevated standard for your life. In your journey as disciples of Jesus, keep moving ever upward. Excelsior!

I’m guessing that Paul emphasizes the importance of thinking about excellence because he knows that if we are not careful, we can quickly become satisfied or stuck with things that are way less than excellent. I started thinking this week about the difference between the qualities St. Paul associates with the concept of EXCELLENCE and their opposite characteristics, as suggested in that chart. I thought: Which side of that chart better describes what is being pushed at us today? And which side of that chart do I want to live on or have describe me? How about you?

As I made this chart, I thought back to an odd conversation (but also a defining moment) I had with the founding pastor of Christ Church, as I was just stepping into his role. Art DeKruyter said to me: *“Dan, we don’t take people’s second-hand furniture here.”* The statement was striking to me for two reasons. The first was because Dr. DeKruyter was clearly a Big Vision Guy and for him to focus on furniture seemed pretty small – not exactly a NOTES AT THE DOOR level statement! But Art’s words struck me for a second reason. As I thought about it, I realized that pretty much every other church I’d ever attended was strewn with people’s second-hand things. I’d even heard people saying things like: *“That couch is old… that TV is out-of-date… that artwork isn’t great… I know, let’s give it to the church!”*

So, I asked Dr. DeKruyter to say more about this furniture thing. *“We don’t take people’s cast-off stuff,”* Art told me, “*for the same reason we don’t have bulletin board’s overflowing with flyers or just so-so teachers on our platforms. We don’t always succeed, but we strive for excellence here.”* And I pressed further: “Well, Art, if you have to spend a whole lot of money on the physical plant and on the communications and on first-rate staff and everything else, doesn’t that open you to criticism? Don’t people say: “That’s poor stewardship! That money could go to missions!”

*“They say it all the time,”* Art replied, *“and I point them toward all the churches where they may be more at home. I say: Here’s our philosophy. We think excellence glorifies God. We think excellence attracts aspiring people. We think pursuing excellence is more costly at the front end but ultimately mobilizes more resources toward the poor and the other purposes of God’s kingdom than if we adopted the second-hand, good-enough mentality prevalent elsewhere.”*

What do you think about that philosophy? Twenty-eight years ago, it made ME want to leave a resort community in San Diego and come here. If I had discerned one thing about God over the course of my spiritual journey, it was that God was excellent in his being and in his doing.God was in himself and sought to advance in others whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. I wanted to be part of a church that understood that, that was trying to reflect that, that dared to invest in that, with a relentless hope of spreading that – to LIFT people higher. Excelsior!

And God answered my prayer. Next to being Amy’s husband and a father to Rush, Cole and Reed, being part of God’s movement through YOU has been the greatest privilege of my life. I have tried to honor the tradition that Dr. DeKruyter and the other founders of this church honored by spurring our staff, congregation and ministries toward greater excellence in all the ways I’ve known how. We’ve traveled far and climbed some mountains together. The quality we’ve sought in our ministries has yielded a stunning impact upon tens of thousands of lives and moved more than $40M toward God’s mission in the world beyond this place.

But, as I shared last week, I’ve failed frequently as a leader here. I’ve not gotten close to perfect in anything I’ve done. Maybe YOU don’t have an unbroken record of success either. The good news is that the pursuit of excellence isn’t about perfectionism. We’ve all met perfectionists who want everything done just-so and right now and are highly critical of others (or themselves) for not meeting some standard. Perfectionists idolize performance, often missing the fact that the kind of performance God notices, begins in the heart. You and I will never do things perfectly or make ourselves perfect, but the pursuit of excellence isn’t about that. It isn’t about proving ourselves or drawing attention to ourselves. Pursuing excellence isn’t about us. It’s about wanting to see more of **whatever is** **true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable** fill this world because it blesses others and glorifies the most excellent God.

I don’t know about you, but I’m one of those people wholikes to know exactly what’s expected of me so I can really give my all to that. When I was first interviewing for this job, I said to the Trustees: *“So, being the pastor of Christ Church seems like a pretty big job. It would be helpful to know where you want me to focus. Would you hope I’d prioritize preparing and preaching good sermons that bring the Bible to life? Or would you be counting on me to be a really loving shepherd who connects with and cares for people? Or are you looking for me to build a very strong staff that develops the church’s worship, spiritual growth programs, pastoral care and serving ministries? Or are you wanting me to modernize the church’s facilities and technology so that it can still be current in the 21st century. I’m looking for something to focus on.”* And the Trustees said: “YES! Do that!”

Well, if you want a narrower job description for putting into practice my keynote for today, it strikes me that the New Testament identifies three zones of life where you and I are specifically asked us to live with an Excelsior Spirit. FIRST of all, God wants you to pursue excellence in your daily work. Listen to how St. Paul says it in his letter to the Christians in Colossae: **Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters…**

Most of us have some experience of working for human masters, whether that’s a boss at our job or a teacher in school or our parents at home. We try to do a decent job in hopes of pleasing that person or getting them off our back. Perhaps we’re motivated by the thought of the reward we’ll get for what we do. But would the quality (the excellence) of your work change if you went to work tomorrow and it wasn’t your boss or your teacher or your parents looking over your shoulder but Jesus? Would that make a difference in what you gave to that enterprise?

Here's the truth: Jesus IS watching you with love and hope. What you do and the way you do your work matters to Him. Why is that? Because Jesus commissioned his followers to curate some part of this world in his name. He’s looking for you to reflect by the quality of what you do the excellence of his heavenly Father’s kingdom. He wants other people blessed and inspired by the excellence you bring. And here's a deep biblical truth: Christ rewards those who prove faithful in using the gifts they have to serve Him. **You will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving (Col 3:23-24).**

I love how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once put this: *“If [you are] called to be a streetsweeper, [you] should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. [You] should sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great streetsweeper who did [their] job well.”* So strive to be wonderful at whatever you do, wherever you are, for however long God has you in that place. That vision has been important to me in this place. I have fallen short of it but I’ve wanted to be wonderful in my work and effect upon others because I’ve known that Jesus is watching.

There is a SECOND zone of life where the New Testament says excellence matters to God because it has to do with his very nature. I find it helpful to remind myself now and then, that God did not have to bring me or you or even this universe into being in the first place. God was completely sufficient within himself. He could have folded in upon himself and done just fine for all eternity. But the wonder is that God chose to go the other way. He extended himself out. He poured himself out. One day he would stretch himself OUT upon a cross to GIVE himself as the perfect sacrifice for the redemption of all who put their trust in Him. God is a Giver.

Reflecting on all of this, the Apostle Paul once wrote a letter to the relatively affluent Christians in Corinth. He urged them to let Christ’s example inspire them toward an even greater, more outgoing generosity toward those in need. Paul wrote: **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).** And then, in light of Christ’s sacrifice,Paul challenged the Corinthians. He said: **Since you EXCEL in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness… see that you also EXCEL in this grace of giving** **(2 Cor 8:7).**

I pray that you will take that challenge seriously too. There’s probably no more reliable metric for how much you and I GET the generous character of God than how we imitate that character in the way we give. Over the years, this church has been able to offer ministries at the level we do and LIFT the lives of so many people because it has been made up of people who truly get the generosity thing and I hope that remains true long after I’ve gone through the door. If you are not already tithing (which means giving ten-percent of your income to the Lord’s work), I pray you will set your sights on moving higher in that direction, maybe one percentage point at a time. Start with your after-tax income, if necessary, and grow from there. If you do, you will be showing greater gratitude for all God’s given you. You will be imitating God’s character. You will be one of the people who looks at this amazing church and all its doing to LIFT people in God’s name and you’ll know: “I am truly helping this to happen.” I know that many of you are already doing that. THANK YOU so much. But, if you’ve been more of a spectator than a stakeholder here, I just want to say one more time before I go: Don’t miss the JOY that comes when you excel in this grace of giving.

Then, finally, I hope you’ll pursue excellence in one more way. In chapter twelve of his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, the Apostle Paul describes the Christian church as like the body of Christ still moving in this world. In this body, each member plays an indispensable role. Some have the gift of hospitality or helping or healing. Some have the gift of teaching or guiding others or serving in some other important way. But Paul says there is one ministry and one gift every single person in the church should aspire toward. Paul ends chapter twelve by saying: **Let me show you the most EXCELLENT way (1 Cor 12:31)**. And then Paul goes off on a riff that ranks as one of the most famous Bible passages in history. Every one of you has heard it as some wedding or other gathering. You’ll find it in 1 Corinthians 13.

**If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries… and have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body [as a martyr] but do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Cor 13:1-3).**

Please remember, dear friends, that the highest and greatest form of excellence is to love like God loves. Make it your personal ambition to develop in your heart and to share with others a love like Jesus has for you. Make life-changing love the preeminent brand of Christ Church – the experience that everyone who enters our circle is amazed and blessed by. Francis Schaeffer once said that “the love of Christians is the final apologetic” (the most convincing argument). Atheists and skeptics and people who’ve been injured by religion will harden themselves to a lot of what Christians say. But when they meet a love that is patient and kind, that is not jealous or boastful, that keeps no record of wrongs and does not insist on its own way… When they meet a love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Cor 13:4-7)… Many of them will open their hearts and minds to the possibility, indeed the reality, that GOD is real… that GOD is here… that GOD is for them. So, even as you fail at times, pursue excellence – in your work, in your giving, and above all in your loving. Excelsior – ever upward. This is my note for you, here at the door.