

Out With The Old—In With The New

But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.—Ph 3:13-14

Someone complimented me on the shortness of my sermons last Sunday, kind of a backwards compliment☺, but I knew what they meant, it's much harder to give a concise and impactful sermon than a long rambling one. For this reason, today is sort of a continuation of last week's sermon, which was titled "Use it Or Lose it." As you recall, we noted the fact that many things, including life itself, is use it or lose it. God invested us with life and he wants us to use our time, talent and treasure to good effect; not bury it in the ground.

We also noted that New Years is just the right time to take stock of our investment, to reflect on what we did well and what we did poorly last year, and look forward with faith and hope to what lies ahead. Today, standing on the threshold of a new year, I want to zero in on the main block that most people have in looking forward with faith and hope to the year ahead...and that is holding on to the past.

Many old cultures have rituals guarding against holding on to the past. In Japan, at the beginning of the New Year, people will open the front door of their dwelling and sweep out the bad spirits of the previous year, opening the door for the good spirits of the New Year. There is much wisdom in this. To enter the New Year with a clean slate, we have to sweep out hurts, failures and ill will towards others.

After church last week, the Garabedian family, their little baby and I stood at the threshold of our church doors, God's house. We turned toward the door, put up our hands and "pushed out" evil three times before turning ahead to the altar—to the future of this family—Illuminated by the "light of the knowledge of God." To enter a new year, a new phase in our life journey with God, we have to turn our backs on the family pains, suffering and hurts of the past.

These rituals illustrate why the Apostle Paul's words in today's reading are so powerful as we stand on the threshold of a New Year. Paul says, "this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

To enter a new year, a new phase, a new season in life, you have to let go of the old and let God bless the new. It is so easy to say. And sitting here today, on a nice day in church, we probably can't even feel that we have trouble letting go, that we have any bad feelings toward others, lingering ill will and wounds to let go. Most of us try to put such thoughts as far away from us as often as we can. But, trust me as your pastor, they are there, and they are the main way that the evil one holds us back from being what we are to fully be.

We have them in our families; both home and church. Who is that person in your family, or this church family that you are still hurt by and have lingering bad feelings? If we deny that we are hurt, if we pretend it's no big deal, we invite this evil into a New Year, rearing its evil head when we least expect it. Instead, ask God to help you put off this past injury, forgive and bless the year ahead. What do you look back on from the year past with pangs of regret, that you should have done but didn't? If we deny our falling short, pretend it's no big deal, we invite this soul-eating cancer into a New Year. Instead, ask God to help wipe away your regret, forgive yourself and try again with God's blessing in the New Year.

The problem with short sermons are you can only scratch the surface. I just finished a whole semester on the psychology and theology of forgiveness, and there is so much behind that term that we should know. Please come and talk to me or call if you know you need to explore this more. Nonetheless, forgiveness, in the end is not something you study, it is something you do. This sermon's only goal is to beg you that it is worth doing. "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...in Christ Jesus" is the only known and proven way for next year to be better than the last. May God give us the courage and the grace to sweep out and close the door on the past and begin a New Year with hope and faith in Him "to have life and have it abundantly," now and always...amen.