

SET YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER

(01/07/18)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 38:1-8, 21

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you"

(John 15:1-4)

This morning I would like us to think about making New Year's resolutions. That's right—New Year's resolutions! I don't care how spectacularly unsuccessful you have been in the realization of these goals in the past. This is a brand new year! I also want to say right up front (just in case you might think I am preaching from a position or at least a posture of superiority), I am in no position to throw stones. I am preaching to myself this morning.

I would like us to think about New Year's resolutions from a little broader perspective. Following the directive that Isaiah gave to King Hezekiah so many years ago, I would like us to think about what it would mean for us to put our house in order. To use the metaphor suggested by Jesus, I would like us to think about what branches of our vine, what parts of our life need to be pruned if we are to bear fruit in the year to come.

Let us begin with King Hezekiah. King Hezekiah had just received his death sentence. He, the chosen one of God, the one who had held firm against the Assyrian foe, was to perish--not by the sword, but by an illness that could not be cured. It was just as he had suspected; his time had run out. The words of the prophet Isaiah confirmed this: "Yahweh says, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.'"

How do you set your house, your life in order when you are facing death? What do you do with the goals, the plans that are yet to be undertaken? How do you make amends to those you have hurt or neglected? How do you recover lost moments, lost days, lost years, perhaps even a lost lifetime? There is too much to do in too short a time. Life is never long enough, especially when you know you are going to die.

"Set your house in order." Then suddenly it came to King Hezekiah. This was not a time for dreams. There was no point in setting goals, in formulating building plans. The conquests would have to be left for someone else. Hezekiah realized he would have to let go of the power he had claimed and used so wisely in his life. Now was not a time for doing, but for reflecting.

Now was the time to reflect on the meaning of life and of his life. Now was the time to separate the important from the unimportant. He had trusted God in life. Now he would have to trust God in death. And so Hezekiah went off by himself, turned his face to the wall, and prayed.

While he was off by himself, Hezekiah reviewed his life--a life that in all honesty he could say had been devoted to God. He had lived a religious life, and he called on God to remember this. "Remember now, O Lord, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." And then, overcome with emotion, Hezekiah broke down and cried.

Strange things happen when we put our life in order. Strange things happen when we turn to God in prayer. God listens to people, cares about people like you and me. God listened to Hezekiah, heard his prayer, saw his tears, and God was moved. God granted this man a new lease on life. The cure was found for his illness. Fifteen years were added to his lot. And for this single individual time was not only stopped, it was turned back. The sun went back ten steps.

The experience of King Hezekiah is an experience known to those who have had an encounter with death by illness or accident. It is also part of the experience of those who, because of their occupation or age, face death every day. I think of Beverly's daughter, Dawn, and police officers like her. I think of men and women who are serving in the armed forces. When you know your life is drawing to a close, there is an irresistible urge to set your house, to put your life in order.

I have known women who feel guilty about dying if their house isn't picked up or if the children aren't all grown and married. I have known men who feel guilty if they have to die while there are still bills to be paid or if the family is not financially secure. We don't want to leave any loose ends when we go, and yet there is no way this can be avoided, especially if we die prematurely. There is always too much to do in too short a time. Life is never long enough, especially when you know your end is near.

We are stepping forth into the New Year, a time of new possibilities. Just as with our New Year's resolutions that articulate our healthy intents for the coming year, we would do well to reflect on the simple yet powerful truth expressed in the story of King Hezekiah. When we find ourselves confronted with the demand to set our house in order, we need to remember that the spiritual, the relational, the deeply personal is far more important than the material.

Set your house in order means more than pay all our bills and pick up the house. It means straighten out our relationship with God. It means take a good long look at what our life is about, how we are living it, how we are living the weeks, the days, the moments of our life. It means review our values and priorities, sort out the important from the unimportant, the true from the false, the meaningful from the superficial, the valuable from the worthless. It means to go off, turn our face to the wall, and turn to God in prayer. It means take a good honest look at who we are and what we are doing with our life. It means to see our life through the eyes of God. Then, in the time that remains, it means to make the changes we need to make.

How many times do people, like King Hezekiah, reorder their lives, establish their true priorities, separate out the important from the unimportant, even become conscious of what they are doing and how they are living their life only after they become seriously ill? Then their eyes are opened. I have seen lives change for the better after a diagnosis of cancer or a near-fatal heart attack, after people become aware of their mortality and the importance of what they do with the days, the hours, the moments of their lives. There are probably many more who would have changed, who would have re-formed their lives, but they didn't recover from their heart attack or automobile accident; they never received that second chance.

We need to be conscious of what we are doing with the days, the hours, the minutes of our life. Many of us say we hold a certain set of values because we have the idea in our mind, but we live out a completely different set of values; we make decisions out of a very different set of priorities in our day-to-day life. How many people only become sensitive to the realities of their marital relationship, to what is happening and also to what is not happening, only when it is too late. If you wait too long to make the changes you need to make in a marriage, the hurt and the disappointment and the resentments may erase the original love that brought the two of you together. When this happens, there is no possibility of reconciliation and healing.

The first point, then, is that it's important to put our personal, relational, spiritual house in order. The second point is this--we shouldn't wait until just before we are going to die.

I'll never forget an experience I had many years ago when I went into Massachusetts General Hospital to visit a friend of mine who had just discovered he was suffering from an inoperable brain tumor. We talked about what he was going to do with the two or three years that he had left, what sort of changes he was going to make in his life.

All of a sudden during the discussion, my friend asked me how I knew I was going to live longer than he. There are many accidents in life -- automobile accidents, sudden illnesses, strokes, heart attacks, and cancer. How do we know how long we are going to live? When Rabbi Eliezer, as is recorded in the Talmud said, "Repent one day before your death," I think he was talking about today.

In the early centuries of the Christian church, German and Italian kings in particular devised the practice of waiting until they were on their deathbed before they would call the priest to baptize them. Their reasoning was that if baptism washes away one's sins, then if you're baptized just at the point of death it's highly unlikely you're going to commit many sins before you die (if only because there wouldn't be enough time), so you are ensuring your entrance into heaven. An additional advantage to the deathbed baptism, of course, was that by holding baptism off until the very end, the king could pretty much live the sort of life he wanted, moral or not, and by being baptized at the very end, wash all his sins away.

Now we may find this attempt to trick God by appealing to a legalistic theology amusing, but some people today go through the very same motions. Some people never build or cultivate religious values; they never develop a prayer life; they never put their affairs in order or think about their relationship with God until the moment when their back is to the wall. As the saying goes, "There are no atheists in a foxhole."

One example of this type of foxhole religiosity is the large number of Christians who are trying very hard to live a Christian life only because they believe the end of the world or the Second Coming is at hand. If only they could see that the Second Coming is not going to be an outward event but is already an inward experience, they might not have to build their relationship with God around fear. In any event, as they say in the theater, I'm not sure a good exit can cancel out a bad performance.

As recorded in the Gospel according to John, Jesus tells us to put our affairs in order. He tells us:

I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from

me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

This is what it means to set our house in order. It means to participate in a pruning process that is already taking place. The good, the true, the valuable, the important, the things that bear fruit in our lives--these we need to care for, to nurture, so they will produce even more. The other branches, the side branches, the dead-end streets, the false, the worthless--these need to be pruned, to be cut away lest they grow wild and eventually destroy the entire vine. "Set your house in order" means prune your own vine, the vine that grows from the depths of your soul, but prune your vine from God's perspective, seeing yourself and judging the parts of your life through the eyes of God.

Life should be a constant pruning process, a constant redetermination of which branches in our life bear fruit and which should be cut off and thrown on the fire. This is what it means to separate the wheat from the chaff. Putting our affairs in order means rebuilding our lives around God, the true vine. It means, with Hezekiah, reaffirming again and again the source of our life, the God who dwells within, the One who can cure us and give us life, the One who can turn our suffering and illness into growth (and sometimes even into health), the One who can keep our soul from the pit of nothingness.

As we enter into the New Year, let us set our house in order that, like King Hezekiah, we may be granted a new lease on life. Let's not wait until we are on our deathbed. In the quiet of our communion service this morning, let us begin this process with honest self-reflection and a commitment to our intentions for the year to come.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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