

SET YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER

(01/21/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 38:1-8, 21
John 15:1-8

Today, following our worship service and coffee hour, we will gather here in the sanctuary to take down all the Christmas decorations that have graced our worship since the beginning of Advent. I am going to miss them. However, as the Buddha and Jesus and Kenny Rogers tell us, we have to learn to let go. Grasping, holding something or someone too tight for too long just causes suffering. I know this is true, but I would like to hold onto the Christmas season just a little longer!

This past week, as I kind of hunkered down following my surgery, I began to dig into the books I received as Christmas gifts. One of them, I confess, is a little unusual—at least as a Christmas gift and as a gift to a minister. Our grandson, Nathan, is my mentor when it comes to anime and manga. He has put me on to several graphic novels and a manga series on Netflix, *Demon Slayer*, that I really liked!

This Christmas, Darlene gave me a set of the first three books of the *Bloodborne* series. For those of you who haven't embraced the Goth world of anime, they are called graphic novels, but they are basically comic books with amazing graphics. *Bloodborne* is about a church, called The Healing Church, that is able to heal people of various diseases by giving them special blood. Sound familiar?

The problem is that when people are given too much of the blood, it transforms them into demons, into monsters that destroy rather than heal. Not to be critical of the institutional church, but does this sound familiar? In *Bloodborne*, the Healing Church either doesn't know or doesn't care that it has evolved (or devolved) from being part of the solution to being part of the problem. Where I am now in the series, a hunter, an alchemist, and a monk are trying to figure out what is happening and hopefully save the lost souls that, against their will, have been turned into monsters. I don't know who is writing this stuff, but in addition to being dark, it's also deep!

Speaking of dark, by the way, have you read the paper or looked around lately? Just saying . . .

But today is a beautiful, sunny, winter day—brisk and invigorating! And here we are, gathered in this nice warm sanctuary, enjoying the creche and the other Christmas decorations for just a little longer. We have just entered into the new year. The slate has been wiped clean. We are starting brand new! Well, maybe not “brand new;” fortunately (or unfortunately), we always take ourselves into the new year; we take our nation; and we take our world—just as they

are. And, as we know, if we are going to make this a better year for our nation and the world, it has to begin with us!

This is why, for just a moment this morning, I would like us to think about the New Year's resolutions that you probably didn't make this year. No matter how unsuccessful you have been in the accomplishment of your lofty goals in the past, this is a brand-new year! I also want to say that when it comes to my track record of actualizing New Year's resolutions, I am in no position to throw stones. I am definitely preaching to myself this morning!

In my defense, however, I do believe that I stand a good chance of being successful in the realization of my two primary goals for the coming year: I have resolved to take more naps and read more books. My wife, in an unsolicited attempt to be helpful, has suggested that, if I am interested, there are a few more items she would add to my list.

I think I will probably stick with the two I already have. More is not always better.

This morning, I would like us to think about New Year's resolutions from a broader perspective than the usual focus on exercising, eating healthy, and getting rid of some nasty habits. 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." Of course, as we approach our annual meeting in February, we could also think about what it would mean for us to put our church in order. To use the metaphor suggested by Jesus in the scripture lesson we heard this morning, 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's 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 life in order when you are facing death? What do you do with the goals, the plans, the conquests that you have not yet undertaken? How do you make amends to those you have hurt or neglected? How do you recover lost moments, lost days, lost years? What about the paths not taken in your life? How can you make up for 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. And we are all going to die.

"Set your house in order." Then suddenly it came to King Hezekiah. This was not a time for setting goals. The conquests would have to be left for someone else. King Hezekiah realized

he would have to let go of the power he had claimed and which he had used so wisely in his life. Now was not a time for doing, but for reflecting. Now was the time to think about the meaning of life and of his life. Now was the time to separate the wheat from the chaff, the important from the unimportant. He had trusted God in life; now he would have to trust God in death. And so, King Hezekiah went off by himself, turned his face to the wall, and prayed.

When I think of Hezekiah going off by himself, turning his face to the wall, and entering into a state of deep prayer, I think of Jesus meditating in the wilderness immediately following his baptism. I think of what Jesus taught us about prayer. Jesus listens to our formal prayers, but he tells us that prayer is more than this. He says,

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Mt. 6:5-6)

While he was off by himself in prayer, Hezekiah reviewed his life--a life that in all honesty he could say had been devoted to God. He had lived an upright life, 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 begin to put our life in order. Strange things happen when we turn to God in prayer. God listens to people, cares about single individuals, people like you and me. God listened to Hezekiah, heard his prayer, saw his tears. 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 man, this single individual, time was not only stopped; it was turned back. The sun went back ten steps!

King Hezekiah's experience in prayer 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 or state of health, face death every day. When you know that your life is drawing to a close, there is an irresistible urge to set your house, to put your life in order. Women have told me they feel guilty about dying if their house isn't neat and clean, or if the children aren't all grown and happily married. Men feel guilty if they are not leaving their family 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.

Set your house in order means more than pay outstanding bills and pick up the house. It means straighten out your relationship with God. It means review your values and priorities, sort out the important from the unimportant, the meaningful from the superficial, the valuable from the worthless. It means to go off, turn your face to the wall, and come to God in prayer. It means take a good honest look at who you are and what you are doing with your life. It means to see yourself and your life through the eyes of God. Then, in the time that remains, the precious time that remains, it means to make the changes you know in your heart you need to make.

How many times do people, like King Hezekiah, set their house in order, 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 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. Sadly, there are many more who probably would have changed, but 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, but if we were to look closely, we might see that we are actually living out of a completely different set of values; we are making decisions out of a very different set of priorities in our day-to-day life than the priorities we say and perhaps even believe we hold. How many people only become sensitive to the realities of their marital relationship, to what is happening and to what is not happening in their marriage, only when it is too late. If you wait too long to make the changes you need to make in a marriage, the hurt, the disappointment, and the resentments will erase the original love that brought the two of you together. When this happens, you have decreased the possibility of reconciliation, healing, and growth.

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. Remember, none of us knows how long we are going to live. When Rabbi Eliezer said, "Repent one day before your death," I think he was talking about today!

Speaking of repenting one day before our death, in the Middle Ages, kings devised the practice of waiting until they were on their deathbed before they called the priest to baptize them. Their reasoning was that if baptism removes our sins, then if we're baptized just at the point of death, it's unlikely we're going to commit many sins before we die. This ensures our entrance into heaven. This leaves us free to live the sort of life we want, and by being baptized at the very end, wash all our sins away.

We find this legalistic attempt to trick God into saving us amusing, but some people today go through the same motions. They 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." We do need to remember, however, that as they say in the theater, "A good exit can't cancel out a bad performance!"

By the way, a contemporary singer named Jelly Roll, who performed at the recent Country Music Awards, has a great song. The first few lines go like this:

*I only talk to God when I need a favor
And I only pray when I ain't got a prayer
So who the hell am I, who the hell am I to expect a savior, oh
If I only talk to God when I need a favor?
But, God, I need a favor.*

Do we only talk to God when we need a favor? Do we only pray when we don't have a prayer of getting what we want by our own efforts? Jesus tells us, challenges us, invites us to build a relationship with God through worship, through prayer, and through an awareness of God's presence in our lives. He calls us to put our affairs in order when 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.

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 the process by which we 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—either as individuals or as a church. And, as we approach our annual meeting, let us think about the parts of our church life that bear fruit, and the parts of our church life that need to be pruned. If we do this in a state of prayer, both we and our church will bear fruit in the year to come!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
January 21, 2024*

OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

In the 6th chapter of the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus tells his followers that what they do for others will come back to them in unexpected ways. He says, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Then he speaks even more directly to Christian stewardship when he says,

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

We tend to think that grasping builds up our wealth and giving depletes it. Jesus would disagree! He tells us that piling up more wealth than we need, not sharing it, is a symptom of a lack of trust in life, a lack of trust in God. He tells us that sharing what we have with others, with the world, with life enriches us beyond our wildest dreams. He tells us that the spirit of giving, which is at the heart of Christian stewardship, will come back to us when we need it most.

As the Lebanese mystic Kahlil Gibran has mentioned, we do not give in order to receive; we give because there is a spirit within us that moves us to give. However, studies have shown that there are direct benefits that accrue to giving:

When we give, we feel happy.

When we give, it is actually good for our health.

When we give, it strengthens social connections.

When we give, we are expressing gratitude in a concrete material way, and this evokes gratitude in the recipient.

Giving is contagious. When we give to others, they are moved to give.

This last reason for giving was exemplified by a gift that was given to the graduates of an area college last May. A benefactor gave \$1,000 to every graduate. However, there was one stipulation. The recipient was to keep half, was to keep \$500, and was to give the other \$500 away.

I thought this was a brilliant message for these college graduates who are going out into life! They received an unexpected gift. However, the gift was not meant for them alone; it was meant to be shared with the world. When I read this, I thought that immediately upon receiving the

gift, each graduate would begin to think of someone in need, someone with whom they could share this blessing. What a great way to go out into the world following graduation!

It is in this spirit that we give, and it is in this spirit that we bless the gifts that we share this morning. Let us join our hearts in the Prayer of Dedication of our morning offering, our mission offering, and the many gifts we freely and joyfully share with our church and with this world.

Let us pray.

We who are touched with gratitude for the fullness of life that is ours, realize that we have much to return to you, O God, and much to share with the world around us. Bless now our gifts that they may be signs, that they may be outward expressions of the movement of your Spirit within us. Grant that they may be expressions of our intent, our commitment to serve you and to bring your message of healing, wholeness, and love to your world, to your children who are in need. We ask this prayer in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.