

Trinity United Methodist Church

January 5, 2020

“Starting Off Right”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Matthew 6:33

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So, according to the fitness app *Strava*, you have about another week before you will give up on your New Year’s resolutions, if you made any. They analyze the activity data of millions of users, I guess including me. I use that app to track my runs, and a few others do. And they’ve figured out that next Sunday, January 12, is when most motivation wanes based on the number of fitness-related activities on their app; that’s when most motivation wanes for most New Year’s fitness-related resolutions. The thing is, if they looked at my data from the last few days, they would see that that has waned *long* before then. But that’s all right.

No matter what your New Year’s resolutions might be, Mark Twain is quoted as saying that New Year’s day now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions; next week you can begin paving hell with them, as usual. Maybe some of us feel like this comedian I read on Twitter: “I love when they drop the ball in Times Square. It’s a nice reminder of what I’ve done all year long.”

Resolutions, goals, whatever you want to call them; more of us don’t live up to them than those of us that do. Because by and large, we are creatures of habit, and old habits die hard. And so, therefore, anecdotally I find that more and more of us don’t even bother making New Year’s resolutions or goals any more. People decide to live out the status quo while somehow *hoping* that things will be even better for them in the new

year. Well, friends, rebellions might be built on hope, but hope itself is not a strategy. Yeah, some of you *Star Wars* nerds got that reference.

One practice that seems to be gaining more traction in recent years that I've heard about is, instead of making New Year's resolutions or goals, to instead choose a word or a theme to "live into" for the coming year. So I tried that last year and stuck with it for most of the year, I think. The phrase that came to me was "Let it go." And no, I have not ever seen the movie *Frozen*, and I don't even know all the words to that song. But the phrase is, in Christian circles, "let go and let God," and that was what came to me last year. That's what I really tried living into, and I really did find it quite freeing, especially in times personally and professionally, when somebody says something, and ohhh, I want to say something back....*No, just let it go.* And it's actually quite freeing to do that.

So this year the word that comes to mind is *health*. Personally, I turn 39 this week, and so in my last year before 40 I want to slide into 40 in the best shape that I've been in yet in all aspects. But also professionally, as a church, to really focus on our health as a church. As a denomination we have been quite unhealthy for far too long, and as we navigate this denominational crisis this year and what will come after General Conference, we as a church here at Trinity are also homing in on what and who God is calling us to be as a church for such a time as this. And a big part of that is to be as healthy as we can as a church together.

And so, as I've been praying about all this for Trinity headed into the New Year, I'm reminded both of this practice of a word or phrase to guide the new year, but also something that I saw from our brothers and sisters in Korea when I traveled there October before last with my doctoral program. While there we took a deep dive into Kwang Lim Methodist Church, which has a big large central campus building, but they have campuses all across South Korea. And as we visited those other campuses, we saw the same feature that they had in the home church, the central church. And that was that they had a banner on whatever side of the altar, and it had a Scripture on it. The reason we could tell was that the Scripture reference itself was in English; the verse itself was in Korean. Have you ever tried Google Translate? You can hold it up to a phrase that's in another language and it'll translate for you right there on the app. It's really cool. So a lot of us were doing that, but we were told that it's their practice in the Korean Methodist Church in particular, that the pastor every year, through prayer and discernment, selects a theme Scripture verse for the church for the year, to guide them in their life together as a church through that year. Of course, I forget what their verse was for that year, but I took these two thoughts together and really felt led as Trinity United Methodist Church this year, for us to focus in on the verse that you see on the wall up here in front of you. I invite you to say it together with me.

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

We’re going to unpack this as we go through the course of the year together, and for now I want you to take this home, to begin to commit it to memory. It’s a short verse, easy to commit to memory. You can use another translation if you want; this is the NIV translation. You can use another translation if you want, but we’re going to dive into this over the course of the year.

What does it mean to “seek after” something, as opposed to just sitting around and waiting for it to come to you? To be active. Actively seeking. What is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God can be rather hard to define. It’s like trying to define God in general: I always say trying to define God and figure God out is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. It’s practically impossible. And defining the kingdom of God can be hard as well.

In my ordination interviews, the theology committee was the last round of interviews that I had for the morning, the third hour of interviews, of racking my brain of all the answers that they wanted to hear, that I felt God was giving me to answer and so forth. And the very last question of that last theology interview was, “Define the kingdom of God and where you’ve seen it in your practice of ministry.” And so I start rambling a bit and so forth and start giving examples of where I’ve seen reconciliation happen in the life of the churches that I had served. And finally one of the clergy on that committee slammed his fist down on the table, and he said, “No! The kingdom of God is (blank). You fill in (blank).” I said, “Fine. The kingdom of God is *love*. That’s all I got.” And that was literally the way I answered. And he goes, “Huh.” Starts writing stuff down. I passed, but they give you a feedback sheet and they said, “You might want to brush up on your kingdom of God definition.”

We’re going to wrestle with that together. *What does the kingdom of God look like?* What does God’s righteousness look like, for our lives, and how can we seek after that? And then what are *all these things* that God will give us if we seek after Him first? Is God like Santa Claus, that we tell Him what we want and He’ll just give it to us? Or maybe is it something else?

But for now, I want to call myself out on a very dangerous practice of Biblical interpretation, and that is plucking one verse out of the context in which we find it. That is a huge no-no when it comes to Biblical interpretation. One of the most famous instances of this is Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” And athletes put that on their athletic gear, and people think that translates to, “I can do all things that I put my mind to.” That’s not what it says. Also, you read in the context, it’s all about Paul going through persecution. He says, “But, I can endure all this

persecution through Christ who strengthens me.” Right? That’s a whole different thing than, “I can play my best football game through Christ who strengthens me,” right? That’s an example, and we have it here as well.

This verse we find in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. We’re going to explore the beginning of that, looking at the Beatitudes starting next week and how the Beatitudes can be applied to our households through a series called *Bless This Home*. But we find the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7, and so this is somewhere in the middle of it in chapter 6, toward the end. And in this part Jesus starts talking about worry. And He starts talking about, consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. God clothes those, doesn’t He? Don’t you think He’s going to take care of you, as well? He says, don’t worry about what you’re going to eat, what you’re going to drink, what you’re going to wear. He says the pagans, the Gentiles, the nonbelievers, worry about these kinds of things. He says, but you: *Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

There’s a lot to worry about right now, isn’t there? Just the news in the first four days of the year 2020. Holy cow, right? There is a lot to worry about worldwide, nationally, here in little Smithfield. *Is the bike trail ever going to be finished? Why are we building a stupid bike trail?* Right? (There’s bigger fish to fry, by the way—on both sides.) There’s lots to worry about as a church, as we navigate this denominational crisis in which we find ourselves, and a lot to worry about as Trinity Church. Where will we end up in the midst of all this? There’s a lot to worry about personally. Continued health struggles for ourselves, for loved ones, financial struggles, and otherwise.

But Jesus says, don’t worry. Seek God first, and His righteousness, and everything else is going to take care of itself.

So commit this verse to memory. Let it guide all that we do as individuals, as families, and as a church in 2020. The trouble is that we too often give in to the worry instead of seeking God first. And the problem with resolutions and goals and such – you say, “I’m going to lose 20 pounds this year.” The only problem is, you gain 30, right? So you find the scale going the other way, the easiest thing to do is what? Just say, “Well, forget it. There’s always next year. Right? But focusing in on a theme or particularly Scripture or an idea lets us hop back on that wagon easier. It gives us more permission to fail as we seek after the idea, the Word, the theme, the Scripture that we focus on for the year.

And as Kim shared with our children this morning, New Year is not necessarily a Christian holiday, but it very well could be, because as we take it as a day to take stock of ourselves, to see how we could do better, to start a new chapter, to start with a fresh slate yet again – that’s gospel. Because that’s what God does for us through forgiveness

of our sins in Jesus Christ. Not just one day a year, not just even on Sundays when we come to the table of Holy Communion, but each and every day that we wake up, that we turn back to God and we focus on Him first. After all, New Year's Day is just a date on the calendar. We can renew and we can reset any day in Jesus.

And one of the ways in which we can reset on a daily basis, in which we can refocus on our theme verse for the year, is in prayer. And one of the ways in which Methodists have really focused in on God and God's will for our lives and has been a source of renewal in the Methodist movement is the Covenant renewal service that John Wesley would do with the people called Methodist long ago. He would do it different times in the year. By the end of his life it became a New Year's Day service. And if you look up the service--we had a pastor who used to do it every year, some of y'all know Harry Spear, maybe he did it here, too—there's a lot of reading in the actual Covenant service. I remember as a kid, like, "Oh my gosh, is this going to end?" So over the years we've shortened it to a prayer that you'll find in your bulletin. I asked the office to place it in the bulletin so that you could take it out, stick it in your Bible, stick it in your car, stick it on your bathroom mirror, someplace where you'll see it every day, to pray this prayer. Take a moment to think about it and meditate on our theme verse for 2020.

You see this is a Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition. And as we reset and renew for 2020, I invite you to pray this now with me, together.

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,

Praised for you or criticized for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service. And now, O wonderful and holy God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.

Theme Verse for 2020:

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:33 NIV