

New Year, New Opportunities 2017

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It is New Year's Day...

A day where we take stock in what has happened over the last 365 days and look forward to the next 365.

A day where we celebrate all the joys....and mourn the sorrows of the past year.

And this morning I would like to offer four opportunities I think we can take to make 2017 a fulfilling year for us.

4 simple things that we can incorporate into our personal and communal lives this year.

Now, before we get into them, I want to let you know that none of these opportunities or ideals are revolutionary. Ron and I have in one way or another preached on all of them many times....yet, there are so many simple ideas that are worth repeating...that are worth us revisiting and evaluating how we have been incorporating these healthy practices into our lives...and where we might need to reinvest ourselves in the new year.

The first opportunity I want us to think about in 2017 is Trust

When I look at the Christmas Story we have held close to us for the past week, trust always seems to be at the front of each character's narrative.

Mary—trusting that she indeed would be giving birth to the savior of the world and even though she was wondering at first and asking how this could be, Mary responded to the angel's explanation and proclamation by saying "I am the Lord's Servant, May your word to me be fulfilled."

Joseph--- Can you imagine the trust Joseph had to have....Your fiancée is pregnant....and all you have to go on is a dream of an Angel telling you that it is going to be okay...and that the child Mary carried was going to be the one who would save God's people. And now...even if he can get past Mary being pregnant...Joseph then had to trust that he could be the adoptive father of the Son

of God...what trust...not only in God but in himself...that Joseph must have had for such a task.

The family had trust that even though there was no room in the inn that God would provide a place for Jesus to be born.

And as we found in our scripture passage today...trust that God would see this new family through a journey to Egypt...as refugees fleeing a government that wanted to see their son dead.

What trust Mary and Joseph had...In God...In themselves and in one another?

I think in re-reading this story every year we can forget to take the time to dive deep into what is happening...reflecting on the love Mary and Joseph must have had for one another...reflecting on how they were the only two in their village who really understood who their Son was.

The love and trust that they must have had for one another during those 2 years of waiting...not sure when or if they would ever be able to return to their family or their friends and their home in Nazareth. But in the midst of it all they trusted.

2016 was a year of challenge for many of us for different reasons...whether it be illness...or loss...or violence... or watching the world continue to fight against itself and slander one another....

And it seems to me that trusting that God is at work...that peace is worth striving for...that even if the news shows nothing but negative stories that Good is still happening all around our community...trust in the light that shines in the darkness...is just as important for us today...as it was for Mary and Joseph...

How are you doing with trust this year? Where are you placing your trust? How much are you allowing yourself to trust in God to be by your side? How much are you trusting that God gives you the talent, gifts or support needed for the challenge at hand?

The second opportunity that I want you to consider in this New Year is one we talk about quite a bit from the pulpit...Forgiveness

We have all been let down, we have all been betrayed, we have all been disappointed or hurt by someone in our life.

Hurt, betrayal, pain and broken relationships are part of the world we live in...

But... It is how we respond to these painful moments that can affect the course of the rest of our lives.

Many of us have no doubt met someone who has been hurt and refuses to offer forgiveness...and in doing so they often allow the pain from the past to be a continual burden on their life.

It is easy for us to forget that forgiveness is just as beneficial for us as it is for the one we are offering it to.

When we don't let go of the harms that we have experienced in the past...when we don't forgive...it continues to affect us whether we realize it or not.

Sometimes we just try to just put everything behind us....we try to just forget about it without forgiving....without letting it go.... but then right when we think it is all behind us....something comes back and triggers the pain all over again.

Sometimes instead of forgiveness we look to Revenge. We believe that if we could only get back at the person who hurt us, everything would be even and good.

But as many of us know...Revenge doesn't satisfy...it doesn't work... it still leaves us feeling like things haven't been made whole again...

At the heart of Jesus' message is the fact that God has forgiven all of our transgressions. Because none of us have gone through life without making mistakes...without harming another person? And with the example of Jesus, we find there is no condemnation....there is no continuing burden upon us.

When we forgive someone....we are giving to them what God has given to us...

A Pastor who I greatly admired shared that we need to go beyond just letting what ever happened go in order to forgive someone.

He says that to really forgive someone, we need to be in a place where we can also wish them well...

We need to wish that good comes their way....because if you can't do that.... We are really just waiting for them to get punished and that is not forgiveness at all.

As we heard in the Letter to the Ephesians that was read for us:

“Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.....Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.”

Our Third opportunity for the New Year is Kindness.

Through his life and teaching in the Gospels....Jesus constantly reinforced the importance and impact that kindness and acceptance can have on people.

And in that example Jesus taught his disciples that God cares about being Kind not when it benefits us or the kindness and generosity is just for people we like.

We are instructed to be kind to everyone, even those who do not fit our category of “worthiness” to receive any good that we can direct their way.

United Methodist Bishop Rueben Job says that this command to show love and kindness towards others is so universal that no one is exempt from it.

The Unclean...the rejected...the blind....the foreigner...the immigrant...the widow....the tax collector.... Jesus showed that our kindness has the greatest impact on those who least expected it.

And we must remember that Being Kind is a proactive way of living...

We shouldn't wait to be asked to do some good deed or provide needed love or support.

We don't need to wait for the circumstances of a situation cry out for our aid to relieve suffering or correct some horrific injustice.

We can decide that our way of living will come down on the side of kindness and love to all people in every circumstance and in every way we can.

We can commit ourselves to seek good for everyone in God's world.

And I believe that God gives us the capacity to do so!

Because no matter what I see on the news...no matter what others try to tell me.... I choose to have faith that we as humans are engrained with a pure and unrelenting desire to do good...

We are instilled with a desire to show the grace of God to all those in need.

I see it in our Middle and High School students who complete more community service hours than any other generation before them. I see it in the generosity that those in our community offer to people in need.

I see it in the simple things that people help one another out in this congregation.

And the best part of showing kindness as followers of Jesus....the best part of being a kind and loving and generous church is that we are being kind and doing good in partnership with God.

And when we are being Kind in Partnership with God, Transformative things happen for us as well as those who we are helping out....God works on both sides of the equation....

Jesus clearly tells his followers that when we enter into loving acts of kindness towards the hungry...the thirsty....those left out in the cold....the sick...the imprisoned...when we show kindness to them, we are linked to our King as well...

Finally the fourth and final opportunity I would like to leave with you as we begin our New Year is the importance of Self-Care.

Living a life of trust, forgiveness and kindness towards others never suggests that self-care is unimportant or unnecessary.

Self-care begins with the acknowledgement and reminder that each one of us is valuable and important.

That each one of us is embraced in the unlimited sustaining and transforming love of God.

Remembering this can free us from having to control everything and can place us on a path of greater trust in God, and greater capacity to live fully and faithfully.

So take that extra walk....enjoy that cup of coffee a little longer in the morning. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that if you aren't being overburdened and overwhelmed that you aren't doing enough.

In our community you can't help but see students who are to the point of exhaustion because they have been studying all night long and who feel their whole life is ruined and they can't move forward when they get that "B" so an Ivy League College will no longer be an option for them.

We see those who work tirelessly through the day and night to provide everything they can for their families but forgetting that one of the most important things to their children and spouse is being present at the dinner table and asking everyone how their day went.

Whether it is work lives....or our mission lives.....or our church life....we have to maintain balance.

We have to make sure to take care of ourselves so we can take care of others.

And perhaps...even though could seem like the easiest task out of the four we have talked about today...I think for many of us it is actually the most difficult.

Mary and Joseph had to believe they were good enough and capable of the responsibility of keeping Jesus safe and parenting him in the best way they could. And they no doubt had to take care of one another and themselves to complete the journey.

The disciples were instructed to find balance in their own lives....Jesus told them that when they were rejected by others not to wallow in their failure...or keep trying over and over again with no success until they were burned out...no Jesus told them to shake the dust off their sandals and move on.

One of Jesus' most direct messages to his follows was not to get caught up in worrying all the time.....He said: "Do not worry about tomorrow...for tomorrow will worry about itself."

Just like familiar safety instructions we have all heard on the airplane...."Put your own oxygen mask on before assisting others..."

And today...in the spirit of self-care...and kindness to others I have a small new year's gift for you...

I intentionally made my sermon 500 words shorter than usual today... So that means you all have an extra 5-7 minutes to do something kind for yourself....whether that means taking a few extra moments to enjoy your backyard....or taking the scenic route home....reading a few more pages of your current novel or simply going to bed a few minutes early tonight.....make sure to take care of yourself!

So as we enter into 2017 together....May we trust....in God and ourselves.

May we forgive others in a way that leads us to the point of actually wishing them well?

May we show Kindness to all...especially those who least expect it.

And may we remember to take care of ourselves so we can do those first 3.

Amen and Amen.