

Christmas is Not Over Yet!

I am thankful for our Scripture passages from Matthew this morning...a reminder that Jesus started out his life as a Middle Eastern refugee who had to flee from tyrants who wanted him dead....

When we think of how God so humbly entered into life...born in a manger...and then spent his first precious years on earth running for his life...its hard not to draw parallels to some people we see today. I find it fascinating how God chooses to use the most humble, imperfect and unexpected people to accomplish his will on Earth.

Well, Welcome to the Sunday between Christmas and New Years!

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

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

And even though that December 25th is behind us, I think it is important for us to recognize that we are still in the liturgical Christmas season until January 5th.

And to a certain extent...shouldn't we try to bring at least some of the Christmas spirit with us through the entire year?

So this morning I would like to offer 3 simple ways in which we can take some of the positive aspects of the holiday season with us for the next 362 days.

- 1) Learning to Forgiving Others
- 2) Doing as much good as we can and...
- 3) Taking risks

Looking back at this year of social and political issues, is impossible for us to not hear negative stories on the news....shootings, riots, terrorism, racism, hate speech against various groups of people.

It reminds us that we do not live in a perfect world.

We of course also have to deal with hurt, disappointment and betrayal in our personal lives....

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

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

Have you ever come across a person who has had something hurtful done to them...and they refuse to give forgiveness...and then they use the fact that a person harmed them to make excuses for everything.

And they allow the pain from the past to be a continuous excuse about why they are unable or unwilling to move on in life.

We have to forgive...we can't fall into that same pattern.

Because when we don't let go of the harms that we have experienced in the past....when we don't forgive...it affects us whether we realize it or not.

I don't want what someone else did to me to determine how I am going to live the rest of my life. Do you?

Some times its big things like being abused or a huge violation of our trust. sometimes it may be small like a side comment from an acquaintance. But There are always things we need to forgive.

We may 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.

And unfortunately, Instead of forgiving, we sometimes look to another option....Revenge. We believe that if we could only get back at the person who hurt us, everything would be even and good.

In Romans Chapter 12 the Apostle Paul says this:

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Revenge doesn't satisfy...it doesn't work... it still leaves us feeling bad...

At the heart of the Christmas message is the fact that God has given us an unearned gift...and gift that shows us the light in the darkness.

When we forgive someone else...we are sharing that light with the world.

The New Testament of the Bible was not originally written in English...it was written in Greek. And in the Greek there are 3 different words for love.

The first is Philos- Brotherly Love- This is where the city Philadelphia or the city of brotherly love gets its name.

The second is eros- which means romantic love.

The third kind of love is Agape...this is unconditional love. Love that never ends for any reason. This is the kinds of love God has for us and that we are called by Jesus to have for one another.

But what about those people who continue to hurt us over and over again...and we forgive them but they keep hurting us.

Well, some people are destructive and toxic...and they are going to harm us over and over again and the relationship is never going to go back to how it used to be.

We might need to set up some boundaries with these people....we may not even be able to be around them anymore.

Because forgiving isn't always forgetting....

Sometimes forgiving is remembering....and some people are going to return to their wrongdoings and we don't have to be there when they do.

Because some people... ..need to live with the consequences of their actions....that is how God might be trying to get their attention.

So to forgive is to let it go, to set it free, to let go of the desire of revenge....but not always forgetting.

I heard one pastor who asserted that we need to go beyond just letting what every happened go to forgive someone.

He says that to really forgive someone, we need to actually wish them well...

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

Maybe the point of forgiveness isn't really other people...maybe forgiveness is ultimately about me, about you, about us.

Because when we forgive someone and set them free, it is really like we are setting ourselves free.

If we are still carrying around all the baggage of broken relationships where we haven't forgiven those who have hurt us...it can weigh us down....it can be a horrible way to live.

But God did not create us to carry this stuff around!!!

God created us to be free....

Free from bitterness...

Free of RAGE

Free from anger....

Free of revenge...

Who do you need to Forgive...what do you need to be free of as we enter a new year?

What is it going to take???? An e-mail...a message through social media, a text message....talking with them face to face.

We need to forgive and we to start today...now...

Forgiving is an action....it is something we do.

The Apostle Paul recognized that sometimes even we Christians can hurt and betray one another.

In Ephesians chapter 4 he says this:

²⁵What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself.

²⁶⁻²⁷Go 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.

²⁹Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift.

³⁰Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted.

³¹⁻³²Make 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.”

The story of the Bible is a story of redemption, grace and forgiveness.

The question is.....are you willing to continue that story in to the next year?

Are you willing to be a reflection of God’s agape love?

Are you willing to not live a life weighed down by the anger resentment you hold towards those people or situations that have hurt you?

Are you willing to start over fresh today....and tomorrow and the next day?

Just as we look to the past and take stock of those things we need to let go of and forgive....we must also look to the future to those “New Year’s resolutions” for 2016.

In cruising the internet for various New Year’s resolutions, I found some that we pretty traditional...like losing weight....stop smoking....following the news more closely...

But then I also found some that were quite amusing has well:

Stop drinking orange juice after I just brushed my teeth
 Stop licking frozen flag poles
 Only eat snow that is white
 Go back to school to avoid paying my student loans.

While resolutions aren't a bad place to begin, Jesus is calling us to much more.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a story about a king: *“Then [he] will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’*

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?’³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?’³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

In essence, Jesus is calling us to do good. Doing good is another way we can make 2016 a great year.

But not just doing good when it benefits us or doing good for people we like.

Doing good is directed at everyone, even those who do not fit our category of “worthiness” to receive any good that we can direct their way.

Bishop Rueben Job says that “this command is also universal in the fact that no one is exempt from it.

Doing good is a proactive way of living...

We do not need to wait to be asked to do some good deed or provide needed help.

We do not 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 doing good 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.

No matter how much we may try to deny it, no matter how much the modern media tries to make us care about no one other than ourselves...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.

Did you know that High School students today complete more community service hours than any other generation in history? Did you know that credit card companies are now marketing their cards to people by telling them that they can use their cash rewards to make a donation to Charity?

People are celebrating Steph Curry just as much for his charity work this holiday season as his 3-point jump shot against the Cleveland Cavaliers....

People are flocking to charitable and social organizations that are doing good work in our world.

And that's great...but there is one problem...

While many are doing that good based on their inner most instinct, there are some that are doing it without acknowledging the reason for it.

That is what makes doing good in the name of Jesus Christ so much more powerful.

When we acknowledge that we are doing Good in partnership with God, Transformative things happen for us as well as those who we are helping out.

But we must remember, in helping others, we also need to care for ourselves.

Living a life of service never suggests that self-care is unimportant or unnecessary. Self care begins with the acknowledgement and reminder that each one of us is the object of God's love.

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

This knowledge 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 1) We need to Start Forgiving 2) We need to start doing Good

Finally, to make 2016 a great year, I think we have to take some risks.

And I am not talking about just taking risks in our personal lives, but as a church community as well.

When asked about the future of the Methodist movement, its founder, John Wesley said this:

“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

Sometimes, taking a risk means standing up for what we believe in even when it is not the popular thing to do and in our world today speaking and living out our Christian faith in real ways is not always popular.

If we treat church as merely a place to come and see our friends and not be challenged we will not live out the life God calls us to...

You know many things that Jesus teaches his disciples are very risky...if someone steals from you, give those more...if someone hits you on one side of your face, turn the other cheek towards them as well....

These are risky actions that go against many of our instincts. But the question is....do we believe....do we truly believe that when we take those risks....when we align ourselves with the ways of Jesus that we tap into something deeper...more powerful than anything we ever imagined?

The risks we need to take as a church also involve rethinking ways we can reach people outside of our community in new ways as well as ways that we can keep the next generations involved and active in our ministry.

-We need to be actively identifying areas of ministerial need and taking the risk to address that need.

In an age of Facebook, twitter and Instagram we need to understand the new dynamics of relationship within our society.

We can either stick to the ways of the past and be happy until we slowly fade into the history books, or we can be active and continue to boldly press on as the future becomes the present.

We need to take risks on and invest in our students that have ideas we are unfamiliar with and have faith in God that he has appointed these new leaders with a vision and mission that will increase the church both in numbers and in spirit.

I work with young people every day here at SRVUMC and I can tell you that there are amazing leaders waiting to be given an opportunity to lead in our Church. There are future pastors, there are those who already minister so much in their own ways.... there is an energy in our young people that we must tap into in order to elevate all us to the next level.

We believe in the “Priesthood of all believers”...that means that we acknowledge that God has called all of us through our Baptism to be servants, prophets and missionaries for all the world.

Where is God personally calling you?

What risks do you know you need to take to fulfill your calling?

The super fan never ceases to amaze me....do you know these people? The one who owns every piece of Warriors gear ever made....the person who has the bumper stickers and the truck with the team colors painted on it.

The one who when he sees you wearing a giants hat extends his hand to you for a high five.

The one who will shout across the road Go Warriors when he see another fan...

What would it look like if we were superfans for Christ?

What would it look like if I saw you on the other side of the road in downtown Danville....and my love for you as my brother or sister in Christ was too much for me to contain and I shouted across the way “Jeeeeeeeeesssuuuuuuuuuusssss....”

And you shouted back “Is my Teachea’, redeema’ and friennnnnda!”

When the time comes to look back and examine your life do you want to know that you were fine just going through the motions...

Or do you want to know that you took a stand for beliefs you knew were right...you were not afraid of being politically incorrect if it meant that the truth was in what you spoke?

Do you want to be able to know that you were offered the most precious gift that anyone has received and you shared it! You did not keep it to yourself! You did not tear it down and rebuild it into something else! You cherished it, showed it to all whom that met and never ceased to be amazed and inspired by its beauty and grace.

So as we enter 2016....there is much more for us to do than just hit the gym...set aside our vices and Stop licking frozen flag poles...

May we remember to forgive....to do good and to not be afraid to take risks in the name of our faith. Amen and Amen.