

(Colossians 3:12-17 NRSV)

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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Christ in Us

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Text: Colossians 3:12-17

When I was a boy, no one would have guessed that I would have spent so much of my life in school. The first day I ever went to school, I had my fill by noon. At lunch, barely six years old, I went AWOL. I walked home and announced to my mother that a morning of school had taught me all I needed to know: it wasn't very much fun, and I didn't want to go anymore.

Today there would probably be a lawsuit filed against the school for letting me wander off so easily. In that less litigious age, my mother simply marched me back to school, all the way informing me that I must stay in school far longer than three hours. Had she any idea how long I would actually stay, she might have had second thoughts; she might have apprenticed me into meaningful work.

Well, this isn't a sermon about my childhood school experiences, except to say that I did become very fond of school, and as time went on, especially as school became more demanding, I began to notice one thing I liked very much. In school there were always fresh starts. You could have a very bad marking period or semester, but soon enough the new term started, and it seemed a lot like a clean slate. The books were brand new, with that fresh new book smell and stiff bindings. There were no missed assignments yet. No behind in the reading yet. No you were supposed to already know that yet. No quizzes yet. No mid-term yet. No papers due yet. At that bright dawn of the term all was possibility, thus far unsullied by procrastination or failure.

I imagine that the new year works something like that for many of us. Isn't that where the resolutions come from? Isn't it the impression we have that we can begin anew? We may have overeaten last year, but today marks the day when I will eat right and exercise. Today marks the day I will stop smoking. Today marks the day when I will be nicer to those I love. Today I make a resolution to take fewer things for granted. You know the drill.

And to many it has become just that, the drill. I think we have become more than a little cynical about New Years resolutions. I hear people say, "I don't make them anymore, because I know I will just break them. No sense in pretending I will do what I won't." I can understand that. I suppose we all joke about how long it

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will take before our good intentions become lost in the daily reality of our living. Others offer more biting criticism. They note that our New Years resolutions focus on getting into a smaller size, and rarely on the big things, like the environment or poverty, where real change is needed. I can certainly understand that, too.

But despite the legitimate skepticism, isn't there something compelling about this fresh start, this idea that we can begin over and be better for it?

When I was in school, the freshness of the new semester would soon enough pass away. Slowly things would become complicated. Sometimes studying would go begging. Sometimes, even with study, the material didn't come into my brain fully. Or the book whose newness had originally held me spellbound became boring. Now, don't get me wrong. School was hardly a string of failures and dislike. But it was definitely the case that what began as a clean slate full of possibility almost always became more complicated with anxiety, boredom, and, yes, a less perfect performance than I had dreamed in the beginning.

Now school is a trivial example. But our lives are not. And doesn't life work this same way? Do we not begin projects full of hope? Do we not begin marriages or jobs or even churches with a simple sense of pure possibility, with the idea that this will be a perfect situation and that we will be always our best self?

And how many times does it work that way? Or maybe a better question is, does it ever happen that way? Or does it almost always get more complicated? Does the love of our life ever live up to the fantasy we start with? Does the perfect job ever turn out that way? And do we ever live up to the best hopes we have for ourselves?

Part of the lesson, of course, is that such hopes are simply unrealistic. No person, job or situation ever is perfect. That's why perfectionists are so miserable most of the time.

But it would be a disservice to our best hopes and dreams to just say that they can never be accomplished, and leave it at that. And even more egregious, for many of us the complications, the missteps, and the hurt that we compound over time become truly dreadful. We cannot so easily walk away from them with a wave of the hand. They have consequences we cannot so easily dismiss.

*** Jack and Sarah had a wonderful family. He was physician and she was an attorney. Their two children were the light of their eyes. They were both respected by their friends, family and colleagues. Everyone believed their lives were about as close to perfection as one could get. I think if you had asked them, they would have agreed.

But as in every life, there were fissures, cracks – nothing huge, but crannies nonetheless. It would be a disservice to Jack or Sarah to point too easily to the reasons for what happened. Maybe an argument here, an insecurity there; a temptation here, a small step there; a minor decision here, a missed signal there.

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But each barely noticeable moment added to every other barely noticeable moment, and after awhile Jack was in an affair with a co-worker. It wasn't the kind of thing you could see coming. It was just the culmination of a web of insignificant moments and frailties. But what had built up gradually through unnoticed moments all of a sudden meant that Jack and Sarah's marriage was in deep trouble, their lives were in turmoil, and their agony was palpable.

*** Tom was a good kid. When he went to college in the 60s, he was the pride of his parents. Anyone who knew the family would have told you what a good family they were and how well Tom was brought up.

So, when it got out that Tom was in terrible trouble with drugs, everyone was stunned. If you tried to piece it together, it would have been hard to do. Like Jack and Sarah's, Tom's troubles were the culmination of a thousand little decisions and situations, no one of which could really be the answer. But there he was, finally, at the edge of ruining his life.

These stories are important, because we are much more comfortable with a clear and simple explanation for life's pains. We want to know all we can about what led Michael McDermott to snap in Wakefield last week. We want to believe that there are obvious and fully preventable reasons why he turned out the way he did. Maybe we'll find such an explanation. Our desire to is understandable. It is much more difficult to deal with the reality that huge breakdowns can, and most often are, the result, the compilation of innumerable little, hardly noticeable events and decision points. That is, it is much easier on us to believe that Michael McDermott is totally different from us.

But whatever the truth is about Michael McDermott, most of us, I believe, have had the experience I am talking about, the experience of some part of our life gradually, unnoticeably going off course. And because how we got there is so complicated and convoluted, and because often the result is so problematic, the desire for a new beginning is more than understandable.

And I want to argue that it is a great idea. When we are stuck in a pattern of living, when we have come to a very complicated place, it is hard to change directions, it is hard to even think of changing directions. Something as trivial as making New Years resolutions offers an opportunity, an excuse, to say, "Today is the day I change." It offers hope that we can begin anew, at least somewhat, even in that the complicated situation in which we find ourselves.

So, I'm less critical of New Years resolutions than I might have been once. They are good things. They just aren't good enough.

Suppose you were to start walking from here to San Diego. Suppose there was a stick 100 feet in front of you which pointed the direction. And suppose that stick is off course by just one foot. One hundred feet away the stick is just one foot off course. Hardly noticeable, is it? But even if you were to walk the whole rest of

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the distance and never make any mistakes, never waver from your original direction, At the end you would be off course 264,000 feet, almost 50 miles. And, of course, if you made other mistakes along the way, the distance off course could be even greater. You could be like the Pilgrims who wanted to end up in Virginia rather than spend their first winter in New England.

Getting new direction once a year just isn't enough.

That was one thing Jesus noticed. He noticed that people could get off course and keep heading further and further away from their original goal. His quarrels with the Pharisees was that they had lost sight of the fresh insights of their original faith. By the time Jesus met them, they had become rigid where their own faith would have made them flexible; they had become proud where their own faith would have made them humble; they had become mean spirited where their own faith would have made them compassionate. Jesus noticed that it was necessary for people to become a new creation every day.

Jesus left a rich legacy, which Paul developed so well. Paul understood that with Christ in our hearts day by day, that with the word of Christ dwelling in us richly, Paul understood that every day of our lives would be a new beginning, a new day, a new set of course corrections. It's not that Christ will make us perfect. We are human beings. We are unlikely to become perfect. But if every day we have a reminder dwelling in us, then the ability to get so far off course is reduced considerably. The daily-ness of Christ in us is a huge asset against our tendency to make errors. It is New Years every day. It is the beginning of the semester every day. In Christ, it is a new start every day.

And this new start is likely to be more effective than once a year New Years resolutions because of where this new start points us, as well. So often, many of us treat symptoms at New Years. I will lose some weight. I will eat better. I will stop smoking. I will be a nicer person. All are good resolutions. But they may miss the deep places in our hearts and souls where the most effective healing takes place. In Christ, day by day we are offered a reminder to bear with one another, to forgive one another, to clothe ourselves in love, to admonish one another with wisdom, to find gratitude in our hearts, and to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

None of us is likely to do these things perfectly. That's not the point. But day by day if they become our prayer, if they become the way we believe we and the world can be, if we see them as our hope and our resolution, then some deep changes do begin to take place. We do actually begin to get on course, and our lives do change for the better. We do become more loving, patient and humble. And guess what? Those New Years resolutions about eating right and exercising more or whatever is your particular cross in this vein, these resolutions begin to become easier to keep, too. For, so much of what we do that strays us from the course we

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would follow is related to our deep spiritual unrest. With Christ in us daily, admonishing us in love and to love, with Christ in us daily, the spiritual unrest which undergirds so much that plagues us begins to clear. With Christ in us daily, our resolutions may have real meaning, and each day is truly fresh and new and filled with possibility.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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