

January 3, 2021

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

"It Is Time"

I'm not very good at New Year's resolutions. First of all, I'm not very consistent in making them. I think this is because when the holiday season is over I quickly move back into the usual rhythm of life and the patterns that were in place for me at the end of the year pick up at the first of the year and life just keeps moving on. On the occasion when I do resolve to do something different or make a commitment to take on some lifestyle change at the start of the year I tend to be fired up at the start and then cool down early into the year. Some of the inside exercise equipment in our house is a testimony to how my best intentions don't have the long term impact my resolve hopes for. You may have similar experiences. Admitting this about ourselves can be discouraging, but then we are reminded that we are people of faith. If we could change ourselves or save ourselves we wouldn't need a savior. Christ was born to be the light of the world, and it's to that light that we turn our attention at the beginning of a New Year. There is one resolution we all can make and that is to renew our commitment to live a Christ-centered life in the year ahead. If you are sharing in this worship, you may be saying, "Living a Christ-centered life is always our goal," and you'd be right about that. But like all the commitments we make, either in our minds or with our words, the real story is told in the ways our commitment is brought to life. This is our focus now, to renew with words and in our minds our commitment to the Christian life and to trust that God will work in us to plant the commitment in our hearts and to bring our faith alive in new ways.

Each day I receive a number of devotional emails from subscriptions that send inspirational messages. Recently, one of these talked about the life of Mother Teresa and her commitment to "be love to and for all." This is how she described God's call upon her life to "be love to and for all." Mother Teresa was sometimes criticized for not choosing sides when it came to certain political and social issues. In the midst of the fray, Saint Teresa of Calcutta refused to align herself with anything other than love. Whatever the specifics look like in the resolve we have in our own lives this year, renewing our commitment to be love for others can open us to the ways God will work a change in us. This is a way of saying that we are not so much making a resolution to change ourselves but resolving at the start of a new year to accept how God will work to change us this year.

Let me share one specific way this can make an impact for us. There were a great many challenges in the world in 2020, and some of those were generated from the tension that comes when folks are busy pointing out what's wrong in other people. The political landscape is permeated by this but we also see it closer in. Our own families and relationships can sometimes be out of balance with our tendency to point out what's wrong with others. We see this in the church, too, where division and tension emerge because the focus is on pointing out the shortcomings or wrongheadedness in others. Challenging one another and calling each other to deeper faithfulness is important but the beginning of a new year is the right time to focus on ourselves. What is there in me that God can change? What about the way I think or perceive others can be transformed by love? Let this be our resolve as we begin a new year, how God can work a change in my heart and allow my life to be more a love for others in the way that Jesus is God's love for me.

Today, as a part of our communion service, we will share in historic words from a prayer by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. Wesley was convinced that a regular aspect of our spiritual lives should be to renew our commitment to commit our hearts to Christ. As we do this, the result will be different for you and for me. God knows what we need. God knows what is lacking in us. God knows the specific way love can change us and how that change can impact how we relate to others and our world. So, let's resolve to be love to and for others at the start of 2021. Our communion sets the table for this God-centered work in us and the words of Wesley's prayer give us a way to be intentional in our hope.

We continue in our worship, knowing this is the time to turn our hearts toward the One who is the Light of the World.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer (adapted 2021)

O righteous God, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
see me as I fall down before you.
Forgive my unfaithfulness in not having done your will,
for you have promised mercy to me
if I turn to you with my whole heart.

I here from the bottom of my heart renounce all that is against you,
covenanting with you that no known sin shall be allowed in my life.

Against your will, I have turned my love toward the world.
In your power I will watch all temptations that will lead me away from you.

Before all heaven and earth,
I here acknowledge you as my Lord and God.
I take you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for my portion,
and vow to give up myself, body and soul, as your servant,
to serve you in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

Lord, make me what you will.
I put myself fully into your hands:
put me to doing, put me to suffering,
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and with a willing heart
give it all to your pleasure and disposal.

Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit,
who by your almighty power have turned my heart from sin to God.
O mighty God, the Lord Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you have now become my Covenant Friend.
And I, through your infinite grace, have become your covenant servant.
So be it.
And let the covenant I have made on earth be ratified in heaven.
In the name of Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.