

New Year – Words not Resolutions

Colossians 3:12-17

New Year's day preaching is something David and I don't often get to do – this is actually only the second time since 2006 that New Year's Day has landed on a Sunday!

So this is kind of fun, to start the year with you for a change!

Worship might not be a traditional start to the New Year for us, but in lots of other parts of the world it actually is ... in India, for instance, where I've often found myself on New Year's day, all the faithful gather together to thank God for the gift of a brand new year in worship services that go on for hours.

Other folks, other traditions – a lot of them food-based.

Growing up in Virginia, the traditional dinner for us on New Year's Day was Hoppin' John -- some of y'all might be familiar with it -- black-eyed peas cooked up with some rice and ham,

usually with cornbread and collard greens on the side -

Eating all of that was supposed to bring you good luck for the year,

I'm told that those of Scandinavian descent eat pickled herring

for good luck on New Year's -

whereas Italians eat a bowl of lentils.

You'll have to tell me if all of that's true -

I'm okay with the lentils, but I think I'd have to pass on the herring.

Whatever it is people are doing today by tradition,

whatever it is they're eating,

what a **whole** lot of people are doing today is making resolutions.

So, herring and black eyed peas aside,

what I'm here to talk to you about is just that: resolutions.

New Year's resolutions.

If you've already made a resolution for 2023,

chances are that it's one of the ones you're about to hear,

because these are the top five resolutions that folks are making right now,

at least according to almighty Google:

Save more money.

Exercise more.

Eat healthier.

Lose weight.

Pay down debts.

All very admirable goals, for sure.

And since the gym I go to – using “go to” very generously -- since that gym is the Town Parks and Rec gym, it’s pretty cheap – so I guarantee it’s going to be packed out tomorrow, because you can knock off three of the top five resolutions all at once: exercise more, lose weight, *and* save money.

That, of course, is if people actually **keep** their resolutions and the truth is that most folks don’t.

By March, if you ask most people what their New Year’s Resolution was, they’ll give you either a look of chagrin or confusion – whatever resolution it was, they’ve given up on it or forgotten it completely.

I know. I have been that diet-breaking, gym-abandoning,
bad-habit-addicted person.

Pretty much every year.

So what I actually want to say to you about resolutions today is –
forget about it.

Seriously.

Drop that resolution idea entirely.

I want to invite you to try something different.

Sort of the anti-resolution resolution.

I'm going to invite you to come up with a word.

A word.

I haven't concocted this on my own –

I've read several pieces things week that have all pointed towards this same
idea.

What all of them suggested was that instead of deciding on something that
you need to do, and may well **not** do,
think about what values you admire,

what values you want your life to express.

Think about what it is you want others to see in you
and that you want to see in yourself.

And when you've spent some time thinking about that,
then instead of naming a particular goal,
choose a word.

One writer called it your 'nudge' word –
a word that will reflect how you want to live in 2023,
and nudge you toward it.

A word that will remind you to live in alignment with what you value.

For one writer, the word was 'growth'.¹

For another, it was 'beauty.'

So what I'm suggesting to you today is that you find your word.

Let go of making that resolution list, and find your word.

Here at Greenfield Hill Church,
we actually have a word already.

¹ Tara Parker-Pope in the Washington Post, 12/29/22

We have a word that is *our* “nudge word,” all the time.

That word is “Christlikeness.”

We talk about it all the time here.

We ask ourselves:

how do we live in a way that is most aligned with Christ’s life.

How do we speak in ways that echo Christ’s words.

How do we act in this world in such a way that our hands and feet are
Christ’s hands and feet –

how do we put ourselves into the places that Christ would be,
and be his presence there?

Christlikeness is, always, our word, our nudge word.

That’s our word as a church, collectively.

But that’s a darn big word to wake up with every morning, isn’t it?

It’s a *lot*.

When you start every day saying

“My word for the day is Christlikeness”

you’re likely going to end every day saying

“well, that didn’t work out so well.”

My behavior at that four-way stop was definitely not Christlike.

And that guy on the phone who so kindly called to let me know that my car warranty is expiring would not describe my response as Christlike.”

So, yes – Christlikeness is a lot to ask of a New Year’s word.

Let’s try breaking it down.

Here’s how.

I’m going to share with you one of the class sessions that we do with our Confirmands each year, our 8th graders preparing for their confirmation.

We start off by telling the kids what I just told you:

that here at Greenfield Hill, Christlikeness is our word.

It’s what we aim for, it’s what we try to be, all of us together and each of us on our own.

And then we say “but hey, it’s hard to be Christlike if we don’t know exactly what Christ was like.”

And that’s when we bring out the videos, the Jesus videos.

I’ve accumulated a whole bunch of videos over the years,

because a whole lot of producers have made films about Jesus, from the pretty awful to the pretty darn good.

For whatever reason, Jesus frequently has an English accent in these videos, and is blue-eyed,

both of which are equally unlikely.

But even if not Oscar-worthy, the videos tell the stories.

And I show the Confirmation kids four Jesus stories.

And after each one,

I ask the kids to think about what Jesus was like in that story, and ask them to brainstorm some words to describe him,

First we watch Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Jesus comes to town and notices the local tax collector, Zacchaeus, perched up in a tree, because he was so darn short.

And Jesus invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus, much to the anger of the crowd.

Why were they all so mad at him? the kids ask,

and I explain that tax collectors were really hated then,

as agents of the Roman government.

So the words the kids quickly brainstorm about Jesus are

“accepting” “non-judgmental” “welcoming”.

Then we watch Jesus healing a crippled woman,

and getting in trouble for it.

Curing someone wouldn't *seem* like a controversial thing to do,

but it was –

because Jesus did it on the Sabbath Day, and no one was supposed to do

anything on the Sabbath except go to worship.

The kids immediately brainstormed “courageous” “compassionate” .

The next clip has Jesus defending a woman who's about to be stoned for adultery.

Standing in front of the murderous crowd, Jesus says

“*Whoever among you has not sinned can throw the first stone*” .

And the whole bunch of them turn and go home, ashamed.

For that one, the kids came up with

“really gutsy,” as well as “merciful” and “forgiving,” “open-minded,” “fair”.

And the last DVD I pop in —

by the way, we are now at a point where using DVDs makes you look old,

I’ve discovered —

the last video the kids see is Jesus, on the road with his disciples,

when a leper calls out to him for help.

The kids watch the disciples recoil from the man and back away,

while Jesus leans in, puts his arms around the man with leprosy, and heals

him.

“Loving,” the kids say, “Accepting, welcoming, healing, brave.”

So then we have all these words up on our flipchart.

Loving and courageous, open-hearted, fair,

Welcoming, forgiving, non-judgmental.

But we’re not done with the class yet.

“All right,” I say, “if those are the words that go into being Christlike,

let’s see how that plays out.”

And I throw out some scenarios to them.

The kid in the school cafeteria that always seems to be by themselves.

The friend that you like to hang out with but who has this ugly tendency to trash-talk others.

That time you said yes to hanging out with one person but then got a better offer.

What do you do? I say. *If you're going for Christlike, what do you do?*

And the kids look at the words we've brainstormed up on the flipchart and they think, and they say

“well, if you're compassionate you're going to go to talk to that kid who's by themselves.

and if you're courageous then you're going to tell your friend to stop picking on other people.

And if you want to be fair and do the right thing, you don't dump the friend you said yes to.”

There you go, I tell them. That's Christlike.

Compassionate and fair, courageous and non-judgmental. There you go.

Those are the words to live by.

A long time ago, a bunch of Christians in a little church in the Greek town of Colossae

were trying to find their words to live by, too.

Trying to break down this Christlikeness thing into something understandable and doable,

just like my 8th grade Confirmands.

So their mentor and guide, the Apostle Paul,

the one who had first led them to faith, he broke it down for them.

He wrote a letter that said

here are the words to live by.

Here are the words that can be your nudge words.

This is how you're supposed to be.

It's what Denise read to you just a few minutes ago.

Live with humility, Paul wrote to his friends.

Bear with one another. Be thankful.

And much more.

So here's what I'm going to do right now.

I'm going to read that little section of Paul's letter to you again.

And I want you to listen, really listen,
to the words that you'll hear going by.

Those Christlike words.

And what I invite you to do, on this New Year's Day,
is to choose one of those words to be your word for this year,
your 'nudge word'.

See what word speaks to you as the one that you can take as your guiding
word for this year,
the one that you want to focus on.

Then I'll leave a little time of silence for you to just sit with the word,
and if in the silence another word drifts into your mind that feels like **it**
should be yours,
well then that's the Holy Spirit at work.

Grab hold of it.

So now listen, listen:

*12 Therefore, 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 one body. And be **thankful**.*

16 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; **teach** 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.*

[SILENCE]

Whatever word is yours, may it be your guide in all the days ahead.

May it guide you closer to the Christlikeness we are all living toward.

And may you feel his strengthening presence close to you

in every minute of every day of this new year. Amen.