

“Resolutions”
January 12, 2020

Colossians 3:12-17

Whether the following poem is familiar to you or not, I invite you to listen well as I read it. Entitled “Continue”, the poem was originally written by Maya Angelou to honor the birthday of her good friend, Oprah Winfrey. But for me, the profound words of Maya Angelou’s poem speak universally and faithfully to all people, especially during this post-holiday season when we gather for worship near the outset of a brand new calendar year.

“My wish for you is that you continue. Continue to be who and how you are. Continue to astonish a mean world with your acts of kindness.

Continue to allow humor to lighten the burden of your tender heart. Continue in a society dark with cruelty to let the people hear the grandeur of God in the peals of your laughter.

Continue to let your eloquence elevate the people to heights they had only imagined. Continue to remind the people that each is as good as the other and that no one is beneath nor above you.

Continue to remember your own young years and look with favor upon the lost and the least and the lonely. Continue to put the mantle of your protection around the bodies of the young and the defenseless.

Continue to take the hand of the despised and diseased and walk proudly with them in the high street. Some might see you and be encouraged to do likewise.

Continue to plant a public kiss of concern on the cheek of the sick and the aged and infirm. And count that as a natural action to be expected.

Continue to let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer and let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.

Continue to ignore no vision which comes to enlarge your range and increase your spirit. Continue to dare to love deeply and risk everything for the good thing.

Continue to float happily in the sea of infinite substance which set aside riches for you before you had a name. Continue...and by doing so you and your work will be able to continue eternally.”

I don’t know about all of you, but I am the kind of person who will drive around a parking lot more than once looking for the ideal parking spot. Even over at Stop and Shop, where there’s almost always a free space somewhere if you’re willing to walk a

distance, I'm on the lookout for something better. It can be exasperating for people in my family, who wind up throwing up their hands in frustration as I bypass one mediocre parking space after another. Call me an optimist, I guess, or just plain stubborn, but I'm convinced if I drive slowly and observantly, someone will pull out of their prime space at the exact moment when I circle back a second or third time.

One of the places where I don't usually have to search hard for a parking spot is over at the YMCA in Ellington. I'm typically there early in the morning, often when it's still dark out, and there's not a whole lot of competition for good spaces. Which is helpful because I confess I'm not looking my finest at 7am in the morning. Given a choice, I'd just as soon park close to the entrance and slip into the gym as quickly and anonymously as possible.

But lately, I've had this problem. In fact I have the same problem every year around this time. The Ellington YMCA parking lot is more crowded. Meaning I have to park further away and trek to the front entrance, even early in the morning. Without checking my calendar, I know instinctively what time of year this is. It's New Year's resolution time. If history is any indication, a few weeks from now that parking lot should be back to normal. But for now, the majority of people who planned to go to the gym as part of their new year's resolution are still hanging in there.

New Year's resolutions. Back in the year 2014, a research study came out saying that thirty-five percent of the people who made New Year's resolutions set unrealistic goals for themselves. Thirty-three percent of those who made resolutions failed to keep track of their progress. And twenty-three percent of people forgot about their resolution altogether. Which means less than ten percent of all people, about eight or nine percent, actually follow through and keep their resolutions for the whole year...

Making and trying to keep a new year's resolution is primarily a secular concept in our modern world. Going to the gym regularly, eating more healthfully, taking more time for ourselves, learning a new skill... Those are all good goals.

But I really like the idea of making a new year's resolution in light of my Christian faith. I started considering a 2020 new year's resolution last Sunday when I picked up my star gift during worship. And I've thought about the idea over the course of this past week.

As faith-filled New year's resolutions go, there aren't many better than the wisdom found in this morning's Scripture lesson. "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience." In this world where too many people put themselves first and too many of our relationships and conversations are marked with incivility and impatience, Colossians provides wise counsel.

"Bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other." Instead of holding on to tired grudges and clinging stubbornly to personal

grievances, why not try walking in one another's shoes and practicing forgiveness? God knows our world could use more of that...

Above all, "clothe yourself in love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. And with gratitude in your hearts, sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God." Embody love and create harmony with those around you. Dwell in peace with your brothers and sisters and let the word of Christ guide your life. Give thanks and praise to God for God's abundant blessings by lifting your voice in song. 2020 will be a banner year if each of us finds concrete ways in our own lives to put the Third Chapter of Colossians into practice.

Then as this past week unfolded, the idea of a faith filled New year's resolution took on new urgency for me. As thousands of American troops were deployed to the Middle East leaving anxious families behind here in the United States. As the rhetoric of war ratcheted up while the threat of retaliation continues to weigh heavily for many across the Middle East region. Is the tension really de-escalated at this point? Who is going to step in and step up to the long term role of peacemaker?

Coupled with the devastating earthquakes happening in Puerto Rico, where so many of our sisters and brothers and so much of the island hasn't fully recovered from the damage of Hurricane Maria just over two years ago. And the wildfires that rage out of control in Australia, threatening vast ecosystems and wildlife and human populations. The way 2020 has started, reminding us of the destructive impact of climate change, this would be a good time to make a faithful new year's resolution, not only as individuals, but also as a community of people.

Which brings me back to Maya Angelou's poem. Some of the images she uses in her poem are enough to take my breath away. "Astonish a mean world with your acts of kindness." Inside the walls of this church and in our interactions with the local and larger community, can we be a bastion, a safe harbor of love for all people?

"Remind the people that each is as good as the other and that no one is beneath nor above you." Can we see the image of God in the people we encounter, both friend and enemy and stranger alike?

"Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer..." Instead of asking God for what we want or what we think we need, let's start by expressing to God a measure of gratitude for what God is already doing. "And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good." For people of faith like you and me, we believe the arc of God's moral universe bends toward hope and goodness.

"And to dare to love deeply and risk everything for the good thing." In First Corinthians, a passage familiar to many of you ends with these words. "Faith, hope and love abide these three...and the greatest of these is love." Yes, love is worth the risk.

As she ends her poem, Maya Angelou offers a vision of comfort capable of sustaining and inspiring even in the midst of this world's swirling anxiety. "to float happily in the sea of infinite substance which set aside riches for you before you had a name." It makes you want to add an "amen" to the end of the poem.

So just to be clear, it's not too late to make a New Year's resolution. Amen.