

New Year's Message, 2017:

Preface:

So, friends. I've put an adjusted preaching map in our bulletins for this morning. We're taking a brief break from Matthew this month. And my hope for this break is to talk about a handful of inter-related things, things that are hard to untangle, that affect each other, but are all about what it means to be us, as individuals, and us together, as Smoky Row Brethren Church. It's a break to talk about what it means to be us together, and each of us personally. These themes will come up in every message, more or less depending on the topic at hand, but they're very much intertwined and really important. So that's going to be January; after that we'll join back into Matthew and walk with Jesus there. Right now, let me pray.

Prayer:

Introduction:

So the year has turned. We're in 2017. For some of us, the way this is most relevant is that we're going to get the date wrong on all our checks for a couple of weeks.

But every threshold, every transition, gives us some sort of opportunity. And, creatively, I thought we'd take a risk and talk about "newness" this morning. What it means to enter a new year, and what opportunities it gives us to consider how we're living.

I mean, there really is something about a New Year that makes us think about the last one, makes us wonder about how this one will be, and really does cause us to resolve to

live “better,” whatever we mean by that.

And let’s talk about what we should mean by that.

Making All Things New:

In that passage that was read to us from Revelation, we heard God declare “I am making all things new!” And it was a passage that drew on dozens of promises from Isaiah about the way God would finally come through for his people, would remake the world as they knew it, destroy death, bring peace, and take care of every need his people had. John, in Revelation, reminds us that this is still coming, that it’s centered around Jesus and what Jesus has done, and that this--oh, act of making things new--is not only on its way, but it’s already started--we’re in the middle of it, taking part in it as we keep faith with Jesus.

This is a lot like what Paul says in 2 Corinthians:

“If anyone is in Christ--New Creation! Everything old has passed away. Behold! Everything has become new.”

He goes on to say that this is all because of God, who reconciled himself to us--restored our relationship with him. Right before this, Paul says

“...the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.”

Jesus' death and resurrection has caused a shift, for Paul, in what it means for people to really live, to exist at all. We're not supposed to evaluate people from a this-world-only perspective, but to see all people in light of what the Messiah has done, and in particular, to realize that what's true of Jesus can be said to be already true of those of us who trust him, exactly and entirely because God *is* so faithful and always come through for us: Jesus died, we've died--at least to our pre-Jesus way of life--Jesus has been resurrected--we will be too, and we should live our lives like he lived, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" as he says in Romans.

Paul's greater point is that something new has happened in Jesus, and that what happened in Jesus, to Jesus, has already begun to happen in us and is so certain that we can count on it being made permanent.

We bear witness to what the life of new heaven and earth will be like, because we're able to live like Jesus lived, trust God like Jesus trusted God. When people look at us, they see what "New Creation" looks like.

Or: they could, they should. We wish they would.

Living Up to What We Are:

When Paul says "Everything old has passed away: Look! Everything has become new" it should be a reminder to us to ask ourselves how well we're doing living up to who we really are.

Because who we really are are people who "live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us,"

people who are part of the “new creation,” even as we live in this one that’s passing away.

Are we putting on Christ? Dressing up in his clothes, walking in his shoes, embodying him and becoming more like him all the time?

What I always want for us is that we simply live up to who we are.

You know what I mean, by this, right? Most of us are told--or we pick up along the way--some ideal of who we're meant to be. "That's not what Hagopians do." we hear--you all heard, that, right? It shaped your choices so much. "That's not American," we hear. We're given nicknames: You're a cowboy. You're a princess. Some part of us is elevated up above the rest, and we latch onto it, and it directs who we try to be in the world: "You're so athletic, you're so smart, you're so good with people, you're so kind."

I've told you in the past how my grandpa would call me a "honky" whenever I did anything great. And I wanted to be a honky. It was high praise. It meant I could eat big sandwiches and carry too much firewood, and it was praise. When my grandpa called me a honky, I felt great. It was “well done my good and faithful servant” a thousand times over. Now I feel a little icky about it. Don't want a be a honky. You know what I want to be? I want to be a Christian. I want to live up to the new creation life God has given to me because he loves me.

Tacking Things On:

And we can tack things onto this. Maybe we should.

I want to be a faithful Christian who in 2017 stops drinking so many calories and loses some weight. I want to live up to my New Creation identity who, in 2017, reads more non-fiction books.

But to be someone who is more like Christ: that's something that should be a part of what we desire for this coming year. It really should be.

And it's my guess that if we've thought of resolutions for 2017, our thinking hasn't been directed nearly as much by the Bible and Christianity as it has by, say, what we've seen on Pinterest or TV or Facebook or Instagram.

Christian Resolutions?

Living in this old-creation world as new-creation people takes effort; every faithful thing takes effort. We aren't going to accidentally, by magic, choose to direct our energies and efforts at life toward Jesus instead of toward whatever is marketing to us. If we wait for an accident, we may as well give up. It is worth our while to consider how, this coming year, we are going to intentionally try to become more like Jesus.

And in case we're out of ideas, I want to offer us just a tiny handful. We could call these, oh, "Christian Resolutions," I guess.

Read more Scripture:

Remember, it was good, for me, to live up to the ideal my grandpa gave me. Honky was a name to live up to. There were clear ways of acting that my grandpa modeled, which I copied. This is true for any of us who were taught to live up

to some standard, some ideal--even if it was a negative, "Why can't you be more like your brother?" experience, we at least have had standards to look to.

If we don't read Scripture, don't open our Bibles and read about Jesus, it's going to be really hard to figure out what it is we're supposed to be as New Creation people. Just what does it mean to become like Jesus? You can't depend only on what I say, or what the church says, or what christian media says--even if here and there in those places it's good, true information. We have got to go to Scripture. We've got to discover, in Christ as Scripture presents him, the standard for our name, "Christian," that we live up to.

So: Are any of us going to read more scripture in 2017? Reflect more on what we see when we open the Bible? Is this a resolution we would be willing to make?

Befriend our Neighbors:

And there's something really true in saying that we present what it means to be a Christian falsely if we simply aren't engaging with people in neighborly ways. Jesus calls us to Love God and love Neighbor, and teaches us that through thoughtfully providing for other people's needs and offering them caring attention, we turn strangers into our neighbors. Proximity has nothing to do with this; intentional effort has everything.

And of course not going to prescribe what it might look like in practice to "love our neighbors as ourselves" or to be like the Good Samaritan when we go from here to there, but we could ask ourselves questions that would force us to evaluate how well we're doing in this Christian area.

When was the last time we helped personally care for a stranger--not by the very good and important proxies of money or groups we support--but by our own hands? When was the last time we had a chat with someone who lives near us about anything at all?

Or there's the good old, "What would our neighbors say about us?" If the only reputation we have in the world is that we're hard to get to know, 2017 may be a year we could work on that.

Are any of us willing to work to befriend some people this year? To become a person who is known as friendly, neighborly, caring, helpful, and loving--and a Christian? If we would all resolve to do this, man: it'd be nice to know us, you know, because in knowing us people would meet the Lord.

Catalogue our Prayers:

Maybe this year we could catalogue our prayers, catalogue our prayers. We could write down what we've intentionally prayed for and when, in some simple way, and with it, we'd realize some things:

We'd be able to realize just how little or how much we're intentionally praying. We may be able to see patterns in our prayers--are we always praying for one family in particular, or one place in particular, and why? What are we neglecting.

We'd be able to remember the ways God answers prayer. If I stopped everything, right now, and asked us to try to spend some time listing out the ways we've sought help from God in prayer last year, most of us would have a hard time of it.

But we need to remember what we've prayed for because it keeps us from forgetting just how good God has been to so many people we care about, and us too.

Mostly, though, I think that cataloguing our prayers would force some of us to own the fact that we just don't pray very much--at least, in an intentional, focused way. We aren't used to asking God to act in strategic ways on the behalf of those we love and serve and congregate with, and as a result of never asking God to intervene in our world in particular, focused, intentional ways, we ourselves lose an opportunity to think deeply about our world and how we're living in it. Our ability to think creatively about the situations we find ourselves in, to think about how our congregation might involve itself in God's work, or to simply get outside our own perspective now and then--this ability atrophies in part because we just don't think much about what we ask God and why. A catalogue of those needs we've brought up to God and have asked Him to help us with has a whole bunch of benefits for us.

If many of us resolved to do this, we would become a congregation with a good memory of God's faithful care, and be far more encouraged to pray that God would continue to care for us in specific ways.

Resolving to keep a catalogue of our prayers would change us this next year, if any of us chose to do it.

Engage in Authentic Conversation:

And you know, I want for us to be a group of people who are Christian "with all of ourselves," if that makes sense: People who are Christian Democrats, Christian Republicans,

Christian Vegetarians, Christian Veterans, Christian Veterinarians, Christian Steelers or Buckeye or Crew fans, Christian Ohioans--people who are, really, Christian before we're anything else, and because of that commitment to embrace the New Creation life Jesus has called us into, every part of our lives--political, financial, spiritual, physical--it all is directed by what we know about God.

I want us to take seriously our commitment to "prophetic multiculturalism," and talk about things: politics, religion, sports, sins, fears--knowing that we may disagree, but it's okay, because we are siblings in Christ who are called to love one another if we're called to anything at all.

I want us to hear one another, and think about what each other has to say, and be able to give counsel and help to one another as we sort out, together, the particular things God calls each of us to and how we particularly can be faithful given what's true about us.

I wish that we could make a congregational resolution to engage in authentic conversation with one another about what it means to be each of us. It's a cliché to say that we're all different, but we are, right? And I pray that each of us this next year is going to spend time trying to figure out how to live for Jesus given the hand that we've been dealt. We need to be able to be a congregation that welcomes sharing our lives with each other, even if we're very different from one another.

At least a couple of us could, if we wanted, resolve to have authentic conversations about how we view this or that issue, this or that question, this or that problem that we're

dealing with in our lives. That couple of people, by the way, would have such a powerful resource in their own frank conversation that making faithful, wise decisions about how to follow Jesus would be much less difficult for them than the rest of us. If we could all do it, we'd become famous. It will be as important for us to do this as a congregation in 2017 as it's ever been.

On Goals & Resolutions:

And these "Christian Resolutions" that we could add to the ones we've each already made, or have been thinking about making, they've really got one hope for them, right? Which is simply that we might be people who live up to the example set for us in Christ.

And I'd remind us that a goal is a measurable, achievable, thing. Reading 1 more minute of Scripture a week is a measurable, achievable goal. Giving \$20 more than we give now a month to our congregational efforts is a measurable, achievable goal. And achieving these kind of goals has way more importance for any one of us than, say, intending to spend an extra half an hour a week in specific prayer, but never doing it. Good intentions--daydreams that we never follow through on, hopes we have for ourselves that we never act on--good intentions don't pave the road to hell; they don't do anything, really. Well, they do slowly strip us of credibility in our own eyes.

And what we need more than anything is to believe that we're capable of living up to who God says we are. We're the children of God, alive with the Holy Spirit in us, and if God calls us to greater faithfulness, we can respond to that call with all the resources God has: determination and power that

hold the world together. We can do all sorts of things if we depend on God's help in doing them. And if all we can muster is that this year, we're going to try and eat less junk-food, then, you know: okay. There's nothing wrong with that. But it could be connected to something more.

Something More:

For some of us, pursuing the life of a new creation person may mean something more. It may mean that this year we take seriously some physical or emotional or financial or spiritual pit we have slid into, and take all the resources God gives us to climb from it.

It's a New Year. We have an opportunity--one that's totally arbitrary, and totally real--to embrace who we are in Christ while rejecting behaviors and beliefs that are poisonous. We can make measurable, achievable goals to act in ways that will transform us into people who are more like Jesus at the end of 2017 than we are this morning.

So if there are things about our lives that we need to leave in 2016, leave back there, and turn away from them into the power and freedom and love of God, then let's leave them behind. It could be just that we need to eat less junk food, but it might be something more? And if so, what is it?

What is it?

What are the addictions we don't talk with anyone about? What are the things we use to self-medicate ourselves or to escape from the responsibilities and pressures of our lives? What are the sins that feel good, but only for a fading little while, that we have let control us? What are the relationships that we know are not as good as they could be, but we have

given up on healing them or fixing them? What have we given up stewarding?

If there is one certain thing about the future it's that it will require us to make choices, and that we can, if we want, choose for God instead of away from him in every choice we make. How in 2017 will we welcome Jesus into our lives more fully than we are today?

Conclusion:

So. Have you thought about this next year? What are your resolutions? Are they just, "pie-in-the-sky" hopes, or are they measurable, achievable things, that with the littlest bit of intention and resources you can make happen?

And are any of our resolutions, our decisions to let 2017 be different, "better," than 2016, are any of them "christian?"

We walk around as little symbols, little signs, of the New Creation future that God is going to bring about in the world. Nothing else is more important than doing this well, but we do it while we live, while we deal with jobs and family and hobbies and all the stuff our calendars and receipts reveal about us. God knows this, and wants to help us become more like Jesus right where we are. All we have to do is choose to receive the help.

And if God points out some ways we need to live differently this year, let's respond faithfully. At least, try--for yourself and your family, for our church and our Lord--to consider where in your life you need renewal, and what you can resolve to do about it this year by the power of God.