

SERMON TITLE: "Forgiveness: A New Year's Resolution"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:21-38 and Colossians 3:12-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 27, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

If you gathered with any family members over Christmas, if you talked with them on the phone or had some video chats, if you sent and received Christmas mail, or if you only reflected on memories of Christmases past—I hope those experiences brought you a great deal of joy. But, while those gatherings, communications, and memories have the potential to be meaningful and relaxing, there's also the possibility that those Christmas connections with family and friends stirred up some uncomfortable feelings. There's nothing quite like the interpersonal relations of the holidays to frazzle our nerves and remind us just how much we need to forgive and be forgiven.

In the December 21 *Standard Examiner*, there was a guest commentary by Susan Madsen. She began with these sentences: "This holiday season, the world is in desperate need of healing, from our health to the economy to politics. And while we may feel powerless as individuals to solve these big issues, I believe there is a means for each of us to improve our personal and professional lives: the gift of forgiveness."*

We all know how desperately we need a new and different year ahead than what we've had in 2020, and maybe forgiveness is one way that we can take a step in that right direction. That's why today I'm starting a series of six sermons on the topic of forgiveness. Over the next several weeks, we'll cover the complexity of forgiveness from many different angles. But today we begin with the basics. Considering the scriptures Nancy read for us, let's think about why and how we might make forgiveness our New Year's resolution.

1—BIBLE TELLS US TO FORGIVE

The first reason why we should make forgiveness our New Year's resolution is because the Bible tells us to forgive. Over and over again, Jesus and the biblical writers emphasized the importance of forgiving our brothers and sisters, forgiving our neighbors, forgiving our parents, forgiving our children—even forgiving our enemies. You can't read the Bible very long without bumping into such an admonition. Forgiveness is one of the big items on the Christian to-do list.

I suppose that's why Colossians 3 tells us to put to death our old nature, to take off our old self and its practices, and to let go of that destructive way of life. In this letter to the Christians at Colossae, the Apostle Paul wrote that, once we've accepted Christ, we should make a clear transition to a new way of being. He writes that we should "clothe [ourselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." In verse 13, he says we should "bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other." Then he continues, "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

There probably isn't anyone listening to this sermon who doesn't know this biblical principle already. Even people who hardly know anything about Christianity know that Christians are supposed to forgive. I remember when I was a young teenager. I had been attending church for a couple years with my friend. At that time, no one else in my family went to church. But somehow my two brothers had figured out enough Christian teaching to know that Christians were supposed to turn the other cheek. I can specifically recall one time when they were picking on me and hit me, and then they retorted that I couldn't hit them back because I was "a Christian."

Where I might have otherwise clobbered them in return, I remember backing down that time. Their words gave me pause. What was a Christian supposed to do in a situation like that?

Well, I can tell you that the answer to that question isn't an easy one and won't be solved in this sermon today. The biblical instruction to forgive is fraught with difficulties and complications. That's

why this is going to be a several-week-long sermon series. If you want more-complete answers, you'll have good reason to tune in in 2021. All I can say right now is that the Bible tells us to forgive, and that's a pretty good reason to make it a New Year's resolution.

2—THE BIBLE ASSURES US THAT NEW BEGINNINGS ARE POSSIBLE

A second reason why forgiveness is a good New Year's resolution is that the Bible assures us that new beginnings are possible. The story from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, about Mary and Joseph taking their newborn baby Jesus to the temple is a great illustration of this. While the holy family was there, dedicating Jesus, they encountered Anna and Simeon. Simeon was a devout elderly man who prayed and worshiped regularly at the temple. He was a pillar of the worshiping community, who had held down the fort for years. But, at the sight of the new baby Jesus, elderly Simeon knew that God had answered his prayers. Now God could dismiss his servant in peace. I'm sure you're familiar with the New Year imagery of an old man and a baby. Like the old, bearded symbol of a year past, elderly Simeon could now retire, take it easy, and even lay to rest, because here was Jesus, the finest of all New Year's babies, full of hope and divine possibilities.

I think many of us are reluctant to make New Year's resolutions because we don't believe that our resolutions will ever come to pass. Based on our own and other people's previous experiences, we assume that we might make a change for a week or two, or maybe even a month or three, but then we will most likely fall back into the old ruts and routines. The old family and workplace systems will sabotage our efforts to change. The old habits will draw us back in. The old attitudes will come back to haunt. With that assumption, we are reluctant to even try to change. We give in to the conventional wisdom that there's nothing new under the sun.

But the Bible tells us that change is possible. The Bible tells us that old things do pass away and new things do come. The Bible tells us that we can turn over a new leaf. The Bible tells us that conversion can and does happen.

The writer of the letter to the Colossians knew that change was possible from his own life experience. The Apostle Paul, who became a great missionary and started up new churches all around the Mediterranean region, wasn't always a Christian believer. Maybe you remember his story, which is told so well in the book of Acts. Before he was known as Paul, he was Saul—a Jewish zealot who went around persecuting Christians. Acts 7:3 tells us that “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house. Dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” But then Jesus came to Saul on the Road to Damascus. With a bright light and a voice from heaven, Christ set Saul in a new direction. The forgiveness of Christ totally changed murderous Saul into the missionary preacher Paul who later wrote to the Colossians about the importance of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

Sometimes we think that nothing can change. The pain is so great; it feels like it will never go away. But then a ray of light shines in the darkness. A new sprout pushes up through the crusty earth. A new opportunity comes out of nowhere. An old wound is finally healed. A baby is born who brings new hope for our salvation. Forgiveness is a good New Year's resolution because the Bible assures us that new beginnings are possible.

3—FORGIVENESS IS HEALTHY & POSITIVE

If I haven't persuaded you yet with biblical arguments, then let's go with some psychological, medical, and workplace studies. Those scientific reports indicate that another good reason to make forgiveness our New Year's resolution is that forgiveness is a healthy and positive thing to do. “More forgiving people tend to have better physical health, decreased blood pressure, fewer physician visits, lower stress, better healing from pain and illness, increased personal happiness, [and] reduced anxiety and depression.” If forgiveness is part of our workplace culture, there will be less conflict, less “hurtful rumors,” less legal and ethical problems, and better on-the-job performance.* Who wouldn't want that? Before we're done giving and receiving gifts, let's give and receive the gift of forgiveness. Let's enter into 2021 with forgiveness as our healthy and positive New Year's resolution.

CONCLUSION

The 2021 Chinese New Year won't begin until February 12th. But just thinking about the New Year that begins on January first has caused me to remember a Chinese fortune cookie paper that I had saved years ago. I liked the fortune so much that I kept it taped to my office desk at the Wesley United Methodist Church in Pueblo, Colorado. The fortune didn't tell me that I would soon be seeing an old friend. It didn't say that a partner and I would enter into a new business arrangement. It didn't say that future travel would bring me good luck. Instead of predicting the future the way most of them do, the little strip of paper was offering a freedom from the past that would allow a positive future to happen. My Chinese cookie fortune simply said, "It doesn't matter. Everyone makes mistakes."

Everyone does make mistakes. That's why forgiveness is such an important issue, and that's why I'm going to spend the next five Sundays talking about it. I hope you will plan to attend church and be a part of this exploration. It may seem odd to you that I started this new sermon series on the last Sunday of the year, instead of waiting for January. But, for those of you who would be participating in worship today, I wanted to start this conversation now—before the New Year's Eve clock strikes midnight, before the Times Square ball drops, and before you put your emphasis on other things. The birth of a New Year is a great opportunity for hope and change. Besides whatever else we may need to happen and need to do in 2021, we'd all do very well to consider forgiveness as our New Year's resolution.

*Susan Madsen, "The gift of forgiveness," *The Standard Examiner*, 12/21/20, p. A2.