

01/05/2020 VA Jeremiah 31:7-14 Ephesians 1:3-14 John 1:1-18 Christmas plus 2

How many of you have made New Year's resolutions? How many of you gave up on making New Year's resolutions because you've done such a poor job of keeping them?

Worthwhile resolutions are so very difficult to achieve. There are so many reasons why we have not already done what we once again resolve to do in the future.

So often, we humans have overwhelming desires to do things that damage ourselves or other people. Maybe it has to do with anger, fears, eating, drinking, smoking, misdirected lust, spending, or other compulsions.

We want to avoid the trouble that comes from doing these things. But we really don't want to stop doing the things we like to do, at least not enough. How strange that some of our strongest desires can be the most self-destructive.

Then there's another problem with our resolutions. Sometimes, people who are important to us resist our positive changes, even when they pressure us to make these very changes. One example is the family member who keeps encouraging a dieter to have just one small piece of forbidden pie.

Real change means overcoming our own destructive desires. It means overcoming the ways that even well intentioned people may nudge us to do what we know that we should not do.

How appropriate that we begin our worship by saying that we are "captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." We're admitting that we're compulsive sinners,

- ❖ that we keep doing things that hurt ourselves and other people, even when we know better,

- ❖ that we keep putting other things before our God, even when we know better, and
- ❖ that we really do want to do these things, at least in the moment, even when we know that they causes trouble in the end.

If you want to see the most obvious consequences of our human addiction to sin, just look at the daily news. But some of the worst consequences of our sin are extremely hidden and just as damaging.

If our wills are too divided for us to save ourselves, then how can we be saved? Part of my answer is in an old saying that “it takes a person to heal a person.”

As important as information is, it's not enough; or else a good lecture would set us straight. Healthy living, medication, and surgery can do wonders to heal our bodies, but we need more than this to heal our spirits.

There's something miraculous about a relationship with a person who really knows you and cares about you,

- ❖ somebody who usually can tell when you're avoiding or exaggerating;
- ❖ somebody who has life experience enough like your own so that you both can speak the same language; and
- ❖ somebody who can endure your fear when you run away from them or your anger when you attack them for speaking the truth.

A healing person can be a friend, a family member, a teacher, or almost anybody of good will, good heart, and wisdom. This person can help us to be freer from our captivities. This person can open doors to a future that is better than the way we've been in the past.

But there's another wise saying, that "we can't lead other people further than we've traveled ourselves." Even the wisest and most loving people in our lives have their own needs to be healed, forgiven, and renewed. In spite of their best intentions, they sometimes do as much harm as good.

What we really need is somebody who is human and who is free from our human addiction to sin. Now we turn to what is so special about Jesus.

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear "the Word is God," and that this Word "became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." In Jesus, God was born like us, lived like us, and died like us, but did not sin like us.

He's a man who healed, forgave, and taught people; a man who confronted those who were doing wrong, warned them of the consequences that they were choosing, and challenged them to change. In Jesus, God came to us, as one of us, in order to save us. Jesus is more than any other human could be. All creation was made through him.

So he knows us better than anybody else ever could, far better than we know ourselves. He also knows what's best for us, far better than we do. As God the Son, his love is the divine love, the perfect love, that freely sacrificed for us on the cross. It's also the resurrection love that broke the forces of sin and death in order to save us. Jesus is God-with-us, God-in-human-flesh.

Yet, his own people received him not. Even some good, religious people received him not. For receiving Jesus would mean making changes that they were too addicted to make. So they treated their savior as their enemy. But those who did receive him received the power to become children of God, in spite of their sin.

Today, Jesus comes to us again, in order to heal us and free us. Jesus comes through Word and Sacrament, through prayer, and through our fellow believers. His Holy Spirit whispers in the ears of people who comfort us in our troubles, correct us when we're wrong, and help us to heal, for his Spirit can work through even the fallible helpers in our lives.

Jesus invites us to receive him, to trust the love that he so freely gives, and to share his love through our words and our deeds, so that his healing can take flesh anew through us. Jesus calls us to walk each day with him, in a journey of new life that shall be completed only when he comes again in glory.

New Year's resolutions can be part of our daily repentance, dying each day to the sins that enslaves us, and rising each day to new life, with the help of our Lord.

In our failures, Jesus corrects and forgives us. In our successes, he leads us on to the next part of the path. In our sorrows and our joys, in our fears and our hopes, Jesus is with us, God-in-the-flesh, saving us for eternal life with him.

Receive him who comes to you now. Rejoice and keep on following his way. Maybe you'll actually keep some of the resolutions that our Lord wants you to keep.

Amen

Pastor Carl A. Jensen, livingsystemsconsult@gmail.com