***Resolving Resolutions***

A New Year’s Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett

January 4, 2015

**WELCOME**

Good morning and welcome to West Center Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, on this first Sunday of the New Year of our Lord, 2015.

**OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS** Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Because today is the first Sunday of the New Year, a time when the passing of time may be more on our minds than most other days of the year, we are having two additional Bible readings in honor of the New Year. The first reading is from the Book of Ecclesiastes. You may know these words from the 1960’s folk song hit, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” which was written by Pete Seeger, in the 1950’s under the original title “To Everything There is a Season.”

**THE REVELATION TO JOHN** Revelation 21:1-4

Our second reading in recognition of the New Year is from the last book in the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. Revelation 21:1-4 is a vision of a new heaven and a new earth for a New Year.

**SERMON**

The first days of January are commonly thought of as days to think about New Year’s resolutions. Network news commentators may comment on their own resolutions or the resolutions of others, and sometimes we might even ask close friends, “Are you making any resolutions this year?”

Resolutions are almost as fleeting as the sun in January, and suffice it to say that before the ground hog has checked out his shadow on February 2nd, most of our well-meaning resolutions will seem like ancient history, lost in the mists of time, gone but not quite forgotten.

So today, I have some thoughts for us on resolutions and resolving them.

First, try to keep the number of your resolutions down to one or two. Resolutions greater than one or two are hard to keep track of and probably doomed to extinction by our own exhaustion.

Second, be easy on yourself and do your resolving one day at a time. Instead of peering at twelve months of fifty-two weeks stretching into infinity, if we think about keeping our resolution one day at a time, we might just make it, day by day, by day by day.

Third, let’s be reasonable in what we are trying to accomplish. Unofficial reports suggest that most New Year’s resolutions involve weight: the general population would like to take off some five or ten pounds (or more) by the summer or next Christmas at the latest.

And I have a simple way to turn that resolution around so that we and everyone else can master it: Resolve to put on five or ten pounds by the start of summer, and we’ll most likely meet our goal, and then some, by Christmas.

The same way with exercise: instead of resolving to exercise more, resolve to exercise less. We’ll be smiling every time we go past the gym, filled with joy, rather than guilt.

And instead of trying to spend less time on our I-phone and other electronic devices, why not vow to spend more time on them, at least an hour more every day?

If we turn our resolution goals upside down, we might be able to achieve more than one resolution, perhaps making it to a baker’s dozen.

These three examples: weight, exercise and time illustrate the underlying but often understated assumption about New Year’s Resolutions. New Year’s Resolutions are about self-improvement: how to make ourselves more attractive physically, with a stronger heart for added days of life, and more face-to-face time available to the people we care about.

But I think we need to eliminate the “resolutionary” goal of self-improvement, by changing our resolutions to improving the lives of others, improving society. After all, when the baby Jesus grows up, his main teaching is “Love God and one another as I have loved you.”

And so at this tender time in the early days of January, when we may be tired, vulnerable and worried about the “Bleak Midwinter,” let’s switch our focus from ourselves to others when we make our New Year’s resolutions.

And how do we do this? Well I think the best way to switch our resolutions from ourselves to others is to hear some ideas that have been successful.

I wish I could take credit for the short and vital list of goals to live by that Marcus Mariota, the recent winner of the Heisman College Football Trophy has written in his life playbook.

Marcus Mariota, the quarterback of Oregon State University, a native Hawaiian of Samoan ancestry, learned these life guidelines from his high school passing coach, Vince Passas. After winning the Rose Bowl on New Year’s Day, Oregon State will play Ohio State for the National College Title on January 12th.

Quoting from the sports pages of The New York Times of December 13, 2014:

*Coach Vine Passas uses Mariota as an example of a strong quarterback and a good person.*

*Passas requires five things of his players. They have to show love for their mothers, make two people smile every day, do one random act of kindness a day, be a team player in all facets of life and say a prayer when they see an ambulance, a police car or a fire truck.*

*The coach tells his players: If it worked for Marcus Mariota, it can work for you. Here’s the kind of person Marcus Marioti is:*

*When Mariota was a freshman at St. Louis High School in Honolulu, a fourth grader named Tua Tagovailoa joined in the drills. While the older boys snickered behind the fourth grader’s back, Mariota introduced himself and started a conversation. Then he watched Tagovailoa throw and corrected his form. Over the years, they stayed in touch. “Marcus is the reason I went to St. Louis High School,” Tagovailoa said in a phone interview last week.*

*Tagovailoa and hundreds of others gathered at St. Louis High School last Saturday to watch the Heisman ceremony. All day, Mariota reiterated how grateful he was for all the support. All season, home had not strayed far from his mind. He wears a custom facemask that is gridlocked to form 808 — the area code for Hawaii.*

This simple story of a champion football player, who cares about others and does more than win, has a New Year’s message for us: Why don’t we look at the five directives of Coach Passas and turn one or more of them into our 2015 New Year’s Resolutions?

First, show love for our mothers and why not our fathers too? Even if our parents have passed on, we can honor their memory by telling stories about them and sending up to God a prayer of thanksgiving for them, at the holidays or other times of the year.

And if our parents were abusive or neglectful in ways that are difficult for us to forgive, let’s honor our surrogate parents who did the job our parents failed to do. After all, honoring our mothers and fathers, and I would add honoring our mother and father figures, is one of the Ten Commandments.

Second of the five directives: Make two people smile every day. You don’t have to be a jokester or a great wit to make someone smile. I find that giving a compliment or even saying, “Have a good weekend,” can bring a smile to a cashier, who may feel unappreciated, overworked and underpaid at that moment. Making two people smile a day isn’t too much to ask of ourselves? Is it?

The third directive is “Do one random act of kindness every day.” Going out of our way to do something for a stranger will bring a smile to our face as well as to theirs.

Random acts of kindness make the world a better and more surprising place, whether we pick up someone else’s litter on the sidewalk or open the door for someone to go ahead of us. Once a day, every day, why not give random acts of kindness a try?

Fourth is “Be a team player in all facets of life.” More things are accomplished by teams of people rather than by individuals. This is true in sports, at work, and in the church, as well. We are all part of one body, the body politic and in faith we are part of the body of Christ. We are both needed and needy, and anyway, it’s usually more fun playing on a team than flying solo. When we win, we share the victory, and when we lose we share the loss.

The Coach’s final directive is more timely today than he could have imagined when he first suggested it: “*Say a prayer when you see an ambulance, a police car or a fire truck.”*

When we see an ambulance, police car or fire truck, someone in uniform is going somewhere to help someone who is hurting or to stop someone who is hurting someone else. The men and women aboard these vehicles, especially when the horns are blaring and the lights are flashing, are risking their own safety for the common good, our common good. They have split-second decisions to make. They deserve our prayerful support for protection, for justice, for peace on earth, good will to all.

Our nation seems to be dividing into two camps, pro-police and anti-police. But life is more complicated, life is more gray than “pro” and “anti.” Conversation, prayerful support and understanding of differing points of view are what we need in our nation and in our local communities.

So what about our resolutions? I hope I gave us something to think about, as we move into a new year, with all its promise and peril. By working for the greater good of all, “For a new heaven and a new earth,” we may have our best year of all.

And although we may not win the Heisman trophy, we play on the same team. We are team players for God, loving our nurturers, turning frowns upside down, surprising strangers with random acts, and offering our prayers to those charged with bringing healing, protection and safety to our communities and our own lives.

I think Jesus would approve because “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Happy New Year!

Amen.

**HYMNS OF RESPONSE**

Today in honor of Chrismastide and the New Year we have three Christmas carols of response to the sermon:

Hymn 36, “In the Bleak Midwinter”

Hymn 23, “Angels We Have Heard on High”

Hymn 28, “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice”

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