

This Sermon Delivered By
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“Resolution WPGSS”
Colossians 2:6-19

Many of you know our son Daniel is a graduate student in China. We love hearing all sorts of wild stories about his adventures. Sometime when you have a couple of hours I’ll be glad to tell you some of them. He’s made friends with a Peace Corp worker, a young Jewish man named Mike who lives and works in the province where Daniel lives. Mike writes an internet blog which I enjoy reading. It gives me an interesting perspective on life where they are living.

In a recent posting right before Christmas Mike wrote about being at a Christmas party with a Muslim Chinese student. The student wished him “Merry Christmas.” Mike thanked her and said, “But I’m not a Christian.”

The student looked back and said, “But you are American.”

“Yes,” Mike said, “but Christmas is for Christians. That’s why the word ‘Christ’ is in the name.” He said he realized how utterly confused the student was and knew that this was not the time “to delve into Torah study,” so, he writes, “I mumbled, ‘Merry Christmas’ and headed for the door.”

The concept that somehow Christmas was a religious holiday was totally foreign to this young Chinese woman. As far as she was concerned, Christmas is an American holiday. If you are an American, then you celebrate Christmas. What else is there?

Oddly enough, that young Chinese woman is probably right in her social critique. The fact is, for many in this country, Christmas has very little to do with our faith. It’s an American holiday... a time for Americans to hang colorful lights on our houses, to be nice to each other, to give a little money away to poor people, and generally to feel good about ourselves for a few days.

But the reality is that Christmas is so much more than just a secular American holiday, and you’re here today because you know that. Christmas is all about celebrating the presence of Christ. Emmanuel... God is with us. That’s the message of Christmas. That’s the message we have celebrated over the past few weeks.

But now it’s the first Sunday of a new year. This is the time we make all sorts of promises. This year I’m going to lose weight. This year I’m going to exercise. We make those promises, and then, within a couple of weeks, most of us have long since forgotten them.

But I want to invite you to take a risk with me this morning. I want to invite you to join me in making a resolution and actually keeping it... all through the year.

Since Christmas is the celebration of the presence of Jesus, here's the resolution I want to invite you to join with me in making. This year, 2007, along with all the weight I'm going to lose, the exercises I'm going to take on, this year, I'm going to keep Christmas alive all year long, and I'm going to do that by growing in my relationship with Jesus.

This year, 2007, I resolve to be more faithful in my discipleship. This year, 2007, I resolve to grow closer in my walk with Jesus. Since I just celebrated Christmas, the fact that God is with me every step of the way, I want to discover what that means and what difference it will make in my life.

But how do I do that? That's what we're going to talk about today. Let's begin that conversation by looking at a passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians, the second chapter. Listen now to the Word of our Lord.

-- Read Colossians 2:6-19 --

When Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians, we don't know all of the issues he was having to deal with, but it is obvious from the letter that one issue he had to face was what historians call "Gnosticism." It's gotten a lot of publicity in recent years because Dan Brown tosses the word around in the DaVinci Code.

We don't have time for a full blown discourse on Gnosticism. I'm not sure I could give one. But the term refers to a group of people who thought they had superior knowledge. They knew more than others knew. And they knew these things because they believed God had revealed himself to them in a superior way.

One of the things they claimed to know was that God was good and that the things of this world are evil. The spirit world is good. The world of the flesh is evil. What that meant to them was that Jesus, who clearly was good, was not of this world. Jesus was God, but not human. To the Gnostics, that meant Jesus just looked like he was a human being, but he was really just a spiritual superman.

We don't have time to go into all the ramifications of Gnosticism, but suffice it to say, it takes away the impact of the cross. What gives the cross meaning is that Jesus, a perfect human being, doesn't have to die, but chooses to give his life to pay the price for our imperfection. If Jesus isn't one of us, if he isn't a human being, then he doesn't really die on that cross. He just looks like he dies.

Gnosticism also says that God doesn't really care about the physical world in which we live. God only cares about spiritual things. The fact that there are hungry people in the world, the fact that we live in a world of war and terror, the fact that people grow ill and suffer aren't really important to the Gnostics.

So in the face of all that, Paul is saying to them, and to us, get to know the real Jesus. “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” Paul says in verse nine. Yes, he is divine. But he is also a human being... real flesh and blood.

Down in verse 18 he says, don't get caught up in purely spiritual things, like worship of angels and visions, but instead, “grow with a growth that is from God.” Get to know the real Jesus.

Which takes us back to our New Year's resolution. This year, I'm going to grow in my relationship with the God who has truly revealed himself in the person of Jesus. This year, I'm going to get to know Jesus better. This year, I want to know what it means to walk in a close relationship with Jesus.

I don't want just some Gnostic experience with Jesus. I want to experience the real Jesus who makes a difference in the real world in which we live. I want to know what it means to experience real forgiveness. I want to know what it means to have my self esteem lifted up, to know that I am of eternal value.

This year, I want God's patience to fill me and to help me be more patient with others. I want Jesus to help me get my anger under control. I want Jesus to help me make a real difference in the world.

This year, I want to grow in my walk with Jesus. I want to “grow with a growth that is from God.”

But how do I do that? What steps do I need to take?

Well there are probably lots of answers to that question. But I want to invite you to join me in a journey which will lead us in our walk with Jesus. If we are serious that we want to love the way Jesus loves and forgive the way Jesus forgives and live the joy and the peace that Jesus offers, then I invite you to join me on a journey of taking seriously what it means to be a person of worship, of prayer, of giving, of study, and of service.

Worship... pray... give... study... and serve. We use those five verbs as a description of what it means to be a faithful member of Roswell Presbyterian Church, but the reality is that those five are a description of what it means to be a person who is growing in my walk with Jesus. Let's take a quick look at each one.

WORSHIP. Worship is the heartbeat of who we are as Christians. Out of the 168 hours we spend each week, this hour we spend on Sunday morning is a vitally important time for us to be pulled back to center and to be reminded who God is and who we are. This is the time when I come into the presence of God in a special way and experience God's forgiveness and love and grace. This is a time when I offer my praise and thanks to God.

So often we spend our energy talking about the style of worship. Don't misunderstand me. That's an important conversation, and we have that conversation all the time. We are absolutely committed in 2007 to a style of worship that engages us at all levels with all of our sense and all

of our emotions. We're going to be involving children and young people in leadership of our worship.

But whether worship is with drums and dancing in Nakuru, Kenya, or with chants and incense in a Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, or in a military bunker in Afghanistan, what brings meaning to worship is a group of people who open themselves to the presence of God.

This year, Lord, I'm going to make worship a priority. I'm going to be there, Sunday after Sunday. That's a start. But more than that, I'm going to pay attention to the prayers I pray and the words I sing. I'm going to open myself up to the life changing presence of God.

And families, I want to encourage you to worship together with your children. If you were here for the 3:00 Christmas Eve service you heard six year old Ethan Davis read Scripture. What an incredible job. Ethan, like so many other children, sits here in worship in big church every week, learning what it means to be in worship.

Listen, parents, if your children squirm or fidget, don't worry about it. It doesn't bother me, I assure you. And it's vital for our children and young people to develop a habit of gathering in worship, a habit which will carry them through storms and trials and struggles for years to come.

Our walk with Christ begins with worship. But it's important as well that we are people of prayer.

PRAY. That comes next. Prayer is our conversation with God. It's our daily connection. It means sharing our deepest concerns with God. It means being honest with God. Certainly the Psalmist was honest. If the Psalmist was angry, he said so. If he was hurting, he said so. If he was filled with joy, he shared that as well.

We've talked a lot about prayer, and I've told you many times that there are many, many questions about prayer which I cannot answer. I can't intellectually explain how prayer works. I don't know why it is that I pray and pray and pray for someone to get well and they don't, while someone down the hall at the hospital never seems to have a prayer lifted on their behalf and they walk home healthy. I don't know why that is.

But I know this. Prayer makes a difference. It changes my life when I spend time in prayer, and this room is filled with people who would testify the same thing.

I am so glad that when we built our new building we added a special room for prayer. And you know who encouraged us to do that? Back in our early days of planning it was our youth leaders who reminded us that if we are going to be the church God calls us to be, we need to be a people of prayer. Stay in conversation with God. That's second. But there's more. We need to learn what the Bible calls the spirit of generosity.

GIVE. That's third. If we are going to grow in our walk with Jesus, we need to understand what Jesus is talking about when he talked over and over about us being faithful caretakers of God's world. And we need to understand that not just intellectually, but deep down in our spirit.

We need to experience what Paul talked about when he told the Corinthians that God loves a cheerful giver, someone who gives not out of compulsion or guilt but because we have experienced the grace of Christ and in response to God's gift we want to experience the joy of sharing that gift with people around us.

We need to be people who know that all that we have... our time, our talents, and yes, our treasure, belong not to us but to God. We're the caretakers, the stewards, is the word we use in church. But God is the owner. If we are going to grow in our walk with Jesus, we need to learn the joy of giving. But there's more. We need to know that there is always more to learn.

STUDY. That's next on the list. One of the aspects of our faith that is so exciting to me is that there is always more to learn. We never fully understand all that God has to teach us.

Early in our marriage Ellie and I were in a bridge club. Some of you play bridge with religious fervor, I know. I played for just a few years. But the one thing that fascinated me about bridge was that there was always more to learn. You could meet people who were Grand Masters and had been playing for years but they knew there was always more they could learn.

Listen, that's how it is with studying God's word. There are always new and important insights we can gain. And in this text Paul reminds us that we need to be careful that "no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit." We need to keep growing and learning so that we'll be grounded in our faith.

We need to be solid enough in our faith that when people like televangelist Pat Robertson come out with some of the outrageous statements he likes to make, we're able to say to our non-Christian friends, that's not the God we worship. That's not the God I know through the Bible. The God I encounter in the Scriptures is not a God who killed Ariel Sharron because he sought peace with the Palestinians the way Robertson said last year, nor is he a God who dangles the threat of terrorist attack over us the way Robertson claimed this week.

But we can't address those sorts of issues unless we are grounded in our own understanding of God's word. We need to study. And finally, we need to put our faith into action.

SERVE. That's the final step. Here is one of the great truths of our faith. God has given every one of us a particular gift, a particular talent, and God intends us to put those to use for the good of his kingdom. Some of those talents are visible and public. You have the gift of music and share it in the choir week after week. You have a love for young people and you lead a youth Bible study.

But some of the gifts are more subtle. It's your outgoing personality which welcomes people into God's family. It's your administrative ability which enables us to be more faithful and efficient as church workers.

Every person in this church family has a gift, and when we share those gifts, two things happen. We become a stronger church, and you and I grow stronger in our walk with Jesus. I am being the person God calls me to be.

So there we are. Worship, Pray, Give, Study, and Serve. Not a bad way to start a new year.

And what you're going to hear more and more is that as we grow in those five areas, as we grow in our walk with Jesus, we're going to discover that we are more and more linked with each other. Start watching for that word LINC. We're going to be hearing more and more about welcoming new people and being connected to each other as a family... a family growing in our walk with Jesus, reaching out to serve and to care for a hurting world all around us.

We're going to talk a lot this year about what it means to grow in our walk with Jesus. In two weeks I'm going to kick off a series of sermons in which we explore what it means to say that Jesus is Lord of my home, my physical body, my emotions, my money, my future. But it all begins with a commitment to grow in our walk with Jesus.

Today is Epiphany Sunday in the life of the church. Epiphany is a word meaning "to appear." It's the day on which we celebrate the visit of the wise men to Jesus, and the fact that God's light shines on all the world. I hope and pray that at the beginning of this new year, you know that God's light is shining into your life and into the world around you. Even in the midst of struggles, struggles that some are facing right now, today, even in the midst of those struggles, I hope you know the strength and the joy that is available because the light of God's love is shining on you.

But don't forget that those wise men went home by another way. After encountering Jesus, their life was different. They couldn't just go back to business as usual.

And neither can we. This year, in 2007, with whatever joys or sorrows the calendar brings, my prayer is that we will each take a step to grow in our walk with Jesus. May we be people who worship, and pray, and give, and study, and serve.

And through it all, may we experience in a new way the life changing love of Jesus Christ.
AMEN.