

First Things

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United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston

January 1, 2012
New Year's Day

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
Luke 2:22-38

A preacher watched his congregation straggle into church on New Year's Day. He welcomed them with this greeting: "You people look like you could use God this morning." God---along with a good cup of coffee---will do wonders on the morning after the night before.

I'm glad you're in church today. It is a good place to begin the year, here with others who have straggled in to gather around the table of grace. This is a place where you can sit back and take stock of your life and set the direction for the year just now unfolding before you. A place to reflect on those things that provide your greatest source of meaning and purpose, that sustain you even when life isn't so great, that if you had to give up everything else you would say, "But not that." A place to name your priorities, your "first things."

We're all experienced hands with making resolutions, of course---even if it's resolving to make no resolutions at all this year. We say that this year will be different, we will do what we've said for so long we were going to do and will be better for it. "I will exercise. I will get more sleep. I will stop smoking. I will. I will. I *will*."

A lot of will power there. More than most of us can muster up for more than a few days. So we turn to techniques and quick fixes, power strategies and positive thinking. There is plenty of self-help advice around about how to improve our self-image, make friends or more money. The best of it, though, stresses that a good life is fashioned from the inside-out. As Stephen Covey says, it takes time and work and a willingness to organize our lives around well-chosen priorities. Essentially, it's putting our first things, well, first.

To do that means saying "no" to many of the demands placed on us—and that's where things get tough. It's hard to say "no" when we are feeling pressured to respond immediately. We just can't seem to organize ourselves to do it. Which means that we spend a good deal of our time in crisis mode, hopping from one urgent demand to another.

Locking ourselves into urgency prevents us from focusing on what is most important to us. At first things get fuzzy when they're seen through the filter of pressure and stress. But it is far easier to say "no" when there is a bigger "yes" burning inside. As someone said, "You can do it all. You just can't do it all at once."

We've all heard about the 80-20 rule. It's the principle that eighty percent of the work is done by twenty percent of the people. We know all about that in church circles.

But there was a fellow named Pareto who devised an interesting twist on that rule. Pareto's Law says that 80% of the results flow from 20% of the activities. If we apply that idea to our personal lives, we'll look at all the activities we engage in and ask whether they are worth doing. What are the 20% that go the furthest to help us get where we want or be who we want? Taking the time to look at our lives, to discern the "yes-es" that burn inside and organize our lives around them, may be some of the best time we ever "take."

One "yes" that burns within most of us here is the "yes" of faith. Even if we struggle with what we believe about God and religion, still there is a voice, a sense, something spiritual inside us that yearns to be addressed. That is one reason we're in church on New Year's Day.

January 1st on the church calendar traditionally has been commemorated as "the naming of Jesus" day. It marks the moment that Mary and Joseph took their eight-day old baby boy to the Temple and presented him to God—the God who had named him "Jesus".

Many of us were presented to God when we were very small. Like the three babies who came to us today, we were brought to church, had water sprinkled over us and were signed with the cross on our tiny little foreheads. And to the name given to us, to Amelie, Clara, Ryder, John, Mary or James, was given another, invisible name: "Christian." God claimed us, "in the name of Jesus."

That is a very powerful name to be claimed by. It links our present and our future to a holy past. We are here not only in our own names or in the names of our family or people, but "in the name of Jesus," and so place what we do in a deeper, divine significance.

Here on this first day of the year, I want you picture yourself for a moment at work, at school, standing at the kitchen sink, getting yourself and the kids dressed in the morning, talking or texting on your phone. And I want to remind you that all of this activity in 2012 will be done "in the name of Jesus." Because your name is not only Ken or Constance, it is Christian. You are someone who has been blessed by God to be a blessing to those around you.

Maybe we don't need to make resolutions as much as to recognize who we are and who has claimed us, not so much about exerting our willpower but living into the name we have been given.

Friends, we can all use God this morning and every morning. Putting God among our first things will help us to say "no" to a whole universe of possibilities we don't really need because we have a far bigger "yes" burning inside. A "yes" to a lifestyle of love

and justice and forgiveness. A “yes” to a non-violent way of relating to people that helps them to sense the Spirit of God in them. A “yes” that recognizes that we are beloved children of God in whom the Spirit resides as well. A “yes” that lives from the inside-out, embodying the values that are most precious to us commits to keeping them in our top 20%.

So when you are doing all that you need to do this coming year, try putting first things first. Pray that you will do them “in the name of Jesus,” and so become a blessing to the world to your family and even to yourself.