

Shallow Resolutions vs. Deep Spiritual Intentions Deuteronomy 30: 11-20 John 10:10

I don't know about you, but sometimes it serves me well to get back to the spiritual basics. This first Sunday of 2015 seemed like a good time to do that, and to consider what we might call "the basics" in relation to New Year's Resolutions as well. And I want to start by pretty much dismissing the idea of New Year's Resolutions. If you are anything like me, they rarely last until Epiphany, which is January 6 and so they really only serve to launch the year with a sense of guilt and failure when they go south quickly. So if any of you have broken resolutions already, (hand up) (For me that had to do with some delicious Savannah pralines...) don't worry, you've come to the right place. and you are in good company.

And you know, I think God wants more for us than a series of disconnected and frankly sometimes superficial resolutions. I think God hopes that our lives will be rooted in something much deeper than that. So I'd like to reframe the idea of resolutions this morning, and encourage us to think of them not as the isolated, often superficial matters of grim resolve that the word "resolution" tends to evoke, like maybe "I am going to refrain from eating pralines," or "I will stop swearing;" but to think of them instead as deeper, spiritual intentions. And if we are going to consider deeper, spiritual intentions, it seems to me that we can do no better than to turn to today's scripture reading.

The passage from Deuteronomy is really quite beautiful, and serves as a broad call to live life not from the surface level of whatever cultural values might be turning one's head at any given moment, but instead, from a depth place of rootedness in God, and from deep and life-giving spiritual principles. This passage comes from one of the covenant renewal ceremonies that occurred while the people were wandering in the wilderness. This one is actually at the very end of Moses' ministry, and can be thought of as his last sermon before turning the reins over to Joshua, his successor. Moses' message here is very much a back to basics one, a summation of all he has tried to teach them throughout their long journey, first out of bondage in Egypt, and then throughout their spiritual boot camp otherwise known as wandering in the wilderness.

What it really comes down to for Moses, and for us, is very simple: The most important spiritual intention we can set, the one that will root and empower all others, is that most basic intention, which has to be reset pretty much every day, to live life rooted in God or Spirit or the guidance of the universe, whatever language system you might use for it; to live life daily rooted in this deeper place, this place beneath the self feeding loop of our daily round: beneath our plans and opinions and superficial hopes and fears; that place deeper than all

the concerns of our “little me” lives, what we might call the ego. Unless we find a way to re-root into a deeper reality every day, then even our best resolutions will be doomed to failure because on our own, we just don’t have the spiritual power to carry these things off, at least not long term. We need to be like the tree in Psalm One, whose roots are planted down deep in the water table. Only then is it safe from the variances of daily weather, from whatever drought might come along.

Part of the reason I love the Deuteronomy text is that God seems to be saying “Guys- its not that hard and its not that complicated.” Indeed, Moses reports God as saying this, “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away...No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” In other words- the commandment is really very simple and close to the bone. The trick, we might imagine God saying, is that you have to actually DO it, brand new, every day. Its not enough to resolve to do it, or to read about it or think about it or talk about it. We have to do it every single day.

Do what? You might ask. Well, live from spiritual guidance and some kind of deeper spiritual practice every day in order to walk in God’s ways and precepts as opposed to defaulting to the path of cultural values and our own, limited resolve.

And how do we do it? I wish I could give you an easy formula here. But I think we each have to find our own way, with the help of God, to root our daily life in God’s presence. There are lots of suggestions out there from spiritual journeyers who have gone before us. Some of those I have found particularly helpful are from all across the theological spectrum: Roman Catholic Henry Nouen, New Age Eckhart Tolle, Buddhist Pema Chodron, Anglican CS Lewis. Non-church Affiliated Ann Morrow Lindburgh. But even having gained so much wisdom from these and others, there still comes a time when you have to take all these ingredients and cook them on your own stove. This reminds me of a story I heard from my own spiritual director years ago. He told of being at church one day when the minister was going to be preaching on The Lord’s Prayer. But instead of delivering yet another sermon (we’ve probably all heard at least one) where the preacher goes through the Lord’s prayer line by line, (not that there is anything wrong with that. I’ve given that sermon myself!) Anyway, instead of doing that, the minister said, “you know, the truth is that I don’t really get why this prayer is as central to our religious practice as it is. It’s a fine prayer (he said) but to be really honest it doesn’t move me as much as some other prayers, like, say, the serenity prayer or the prayer of St. Frances.” He then went on to say that he had come to the conclusion that the importance of

the Lord's Prayer was precisely that: that it was the Lord's Prayer- Jesus's central prayer and credo that summed up everything He was about, but that the deal for us is that we each have to write our OWN lives' prayer. We each need to take all our deepest values and hopes and dreams and longings and cook them on our own stove and let them become something of a personal constitution and by-laws prayer or faith statement or credo by which we can live. That's what Jesus did in the Lord's Prayer, and that's what we each need to do for ourselves. I must say this story stuck with me. I think he was onto something.

And so I would invite you in this year of our Lord 2015 to consider taking this on. Consider writing your own life's prayer; taking all of your favorite wisdom, thoughts and ideas, your daily struggles, your spiritual helps...and think about working with them, integrating and distilling them until you come up with your own central prayer; your own compass that you can return to to find your way again when you get lost.

And what I want to do now in the brief time that remains to me is offer you an example of how I have tried to do this so far. I offer it not to suggest that there is anything magic in this spiritual practice I have developed for myself, but only to give one possible example of the kind of process I am suggesting for you. So for me, it helps to keep it simple. I need helps, like acronyms, to help me remember things. So I practice a daily prayer life based on the letters in the word "grace." Again, its relatively simple so I can remember it, and it can even be done while driving, which saves me routinely when I forget or don't make time for devotionals before I hit the road.

So I start with G for gratitude, and I offer God or the universe, depending on how Unitarian I am feeling that day, I start by offering gratitude for at least five particular things I am currently grateful for. I find that the more specific I can be, the better. My list usually includes things like a beautiful view I happened upon, or a particular experience I had the day before, maybe a certain conversation or song I heard or a phone call from a friend. You get the idea. I start with gratitude because I think it greases my spiritual joints, it oils the machinery if you will, and sets my rudder in the right direction.

Next is the R in the word grace, and for me that is a reminder to RE-ALIGN myself in God and in this day. I am a person who can easily live in the past, second guessing myself, or in the future, worrying or planning, to the exclusion of being present to what is actually happening right now, which is, of course, where God lives. For me, it takes a conscious and intentional recommitment of myself each day to remember to stay put, here and now, and to try to stay open and connected to the spirit in the here and now.

Next is the A which for me is abstinence from my own personal pitfalls and snares that tend to derail me. We all have them. When we know what they are, we can seek a power greater than ourselves to help us recognize them and then choose to step around them. So for me, I need to make a conscious decision each day, and seek God's help, in abstaining from things like –worrying too much about what others may think, taking things too personally, overcomplicating things, etcetera.

Next comes the C which for me means “concerns” and it cues me turn over to God those things I'm inclined to worry about. This is where I pray for others, and offer into God's healing light and highest good, any people or situations that are needing help right then.

Finally, for me, the E stands in a general way for exercise. This is where I remind myself that I have to actually practice, actually do something with, everything I have been talking about in this sermon. Its not enough to have this acronym and preach about it or think about it. I have to LIVE IT. Further, for me the E for exercise works at a literal level, because I personally have learned that a two mile walk several times a week is absolutely essential to my mental and spiritual health. In fact, its so essential that I have to include it in my central, spiritual credo.

So for now, that's my personal life's prayer, my daily spiritual practice, the way I try to remember to live, as much as possible, in GRACE. I do not use it every day because some days I just fail to, (that's why they call it spiritual PRACTICE as the saying goes) and some days I pray differently than that. But it's there as an easy to remember, default format that I go to on most days, and it has saved me a thousand times when I am suddenly up to my neck in some little panic or some overall apathy or a bad case of ego mind or whatever way I may have gotten off course which, of course, I do a hundred times a day, I think.

I believe we are all called to choose life anew each day. To choose to live from a deep, daily connection with the Spirit, rather than to do what comes so naturally, at least to me, to be battered about by the whims of the day, the shallows, if you will. Perhaps it is our life's work to write our own prayer, which can change and evolve as the years go by, but which can really help us stay anchored, stay rooted, in the Spirit.

Our God says “The commandment that I am giving you is not too hard for you. It is not far away. The word is very near you; in your mouth and in your heart. Each day, may we choose life!”