

“DIG DEEPER, REACH OUT”

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Please don't let the sermon title “Dig Deeper and Reach Out” scare you. This isn't another stewardship sermon, at least not the kind that encourages you to dig deeper into your pockets. But Christ does challenge you to dig deeper into your soul until you reach that place where Jesus lives so he can have an even greater impact on your life.

Who hasn't ever made a New Year resolution? You resolve to change yourself so you can become new and improved. Simultaneously, who hasn't sooner than later broken their New Year resolution because they're so darn hard to keep?

The truth is you can't improve yourself, by yourself, any more than you can save yourself by yourself. You need outside help. The prophets and apostles would say you need God, because without God's help and guidance, you'll soon find yourself going back to your old ways. But even knowing that doesn't stop us from making up self-made remedies that never work.

A man went to his doctor complaining about terrible neck pains, throbbing headaches and dizzy spells. The doctor examined him and said, “I have bad news. You only have six months to live.”

The doomed man made a resolution. From now on he'd live his life his way and thoroughly enjoy himself. He quit his job, bought a shiny red sports car and a closet full of new suits and shoes.

He then went out to buy himself a dozen tailored shirts. He went to the most exclusive shop in town. The tailor measured him and said, “Neck, size 16.”

Wait a minute,” the man interrupted. “I always wear a size 14 neck and that is what I want.”

“I'd be glad to do it for you sir,” the tailor replied, “but I should warn you that with a size 14 neck you're going to have terrible neck pains, throbbing headaches and recurring dizzy spells.”

You know what they say about the doctor who treats himself. “He has a fool for a patient.” Well when you and I try to diagnose and treat ourselves we usually end up misdiagnosing and mistreating ourselves. Again, you need outside help, the one who called himself the Good Physician. He alone can help you look deep into your soul until you can really see yourself,warts and all maybe for the first time, and then save you from yourself.

You see there's something very wrong with us that perverts our humanity, distorts our vision and twists our souls. What is it? The Bible calls it sin, an inherent condition keeping you separated from God and becoming the real you. And as long as you try to improve your broken self, all you're going to end up with is a new and improved broken self.

It's like buying an old broken down car. You take out the dents, give it a new paint job, maybe even get new hub caps. But if you don't go inside the car, under the hood and get a new engine, all you have as an old broken down car with a new paint job and new hub caps.

So maybe instead of making any self-improvement resolutions we should make a Christ-centered resolution. Here it is. It's a prayer: Lord help me realize that my life and the world around me is entirely and utterly dependent on you. Without you I'm nothing, but with you I have the power to become a child of God.

Unfortunately, even the best of us don't always feel entirely dependent on God. Instead we'd rather think we're delightfully independent and smart enough to know what's good for us.

What's more, we've been raised to be independent, able to look after ourselves. That's why we work hard at our jobs, take care of our homes and look after our families. And just in case something ever goes wrong we have our back up plans. If you get sick, you have Johns Hopkins Hospital and if you get depressed or in crisis, you can always go to church.

But when you have the pins knocked out from under you, and all of your security systems are short circuited, that's when you realize you have nowhere else to go but God.

This was certainly true of the Jews, held captive in Babylon after Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed by the Babylonians about 750 years before the birth of Christ.

Before the invasion Judah was a prosperous, independent nation, a military power to be reckoned with. But then the Babylonians unexpectedly defeated Judah as quickly and decisively as the Germans defeated France in 1940. Since it was the Babylonian policy to uproot conquered peoples and exile them far from their native land to weaken their resolve and sense of national identity. The population of Jerusalem was exiled to far away Babylon, their conqueror's capital city. There, stripped of their holy temple and national pride they realized for the first time in a long time, the Prophets were right all along, they were utterly dependent on God.

Psalms 137 is a hymn of lament that comes from the exile period.

*“By the rivers of Babylon
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.”*

But as they worked through their shock and sadness enough of these forsaken exiles began to pray the same God-centered resolution I encouraged all of you to make, “Lord, help us realize that our own lives and the world around us is entirely dependent on you. Without you we are nothing, but with you we have the power to be the children of God.”

When you finally come to that realization and hopefully it comes more than once, you come to still another turning point in your lifetime. Your identity now comes not what you have or achieved but from God. That’s precisely why even if your world falls apart, when you live in the present moment and invite God to live and move in and around you, and especially when you understand your continuous hunger and thirst can only be satisfied by God, that’s when your life begins to turn around and you start becoming the real you who God can already see under your layers of frustration and guilt. That’s when you’re ready to receive the good news of salvation and hear God’s promise for a better life.

Listen to God’s pledge to his exiled people through the prophet Jeremiah:
For thus says the Lord,

“Sing aloud with gladness...

Proclaim, give praise and say

‘Save O Lord your people

*See I am going to bring them from the land
of the north*

among them the blind and the lame...

*a great company, they shall return
here.*

With weeping they shall come

And I will lead them back...’

Here the word of the Lord

“He who scattered Israel will gather him

and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”

It was eighty long years before this promise was finally kept. But this promise kept the people going as they learned the same lesson learned by their ancestors as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years before they were led back to the Promised Land: only God matters, everything else is froth.

Having said that here comes the hard part putting it into practice, which begs the question, “What on earth does all this that happened 2,700 years ago have to do with us today?”

Everything. Once again God is calling us as individuals and as members of his Church to above all be faithful to Him in all things. Not some things, but all things.

When Jesus began his ministry, he chose to begin in his home town. Luke tells us Jesus went to his synagogue and proclaimed:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he chose me to bring
good news to the poor.
He sent me to proclaim release to the
Captive
and to recover the sight of the blind
to let the oppressed go free
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s
favor.”*

You might be thinking “Sounds good, dig deeper and get connected, but it’s just words, platitudes I’ve heard a thousand times before. So be more specific. Just tell me how to dig deeper.”

Some random thoughts to consider:

- 1) Get real with yourself, stop making excuses and pointing fingers. If you know you practice self-destructive, bad behaviors, admit it to yourself and better still a friend you can trust, so the other can pray for and support you and lovingly hold you accountable
- 2) Get on your knees, that is, start talking to God, one on one, and then listen for his response. He could answer you in one of many ways, through another person, a scripture verse, a thought that pops in your head that becomes a conviction
- 3) While you’re on your knees, make your confession. Ask God to forgive you but also resolve, with the help of God’s grace, to stop doing whatever you’re doing that may give you instant, but never lasting gratification
- 4) Keep hoping for God to bring beauty and truth into your life, so you can pass it on to others.

I hope you can find yourself somewhere in Jesus’ litany of those he came to save. We’re all poor in spirit. What’s more we’re usually oblivious to the sin and oppression around us because we’re immersed in the world system, the secular culture which can be defined as being organized outside the authority of God.

That’s precisely why we need Jesus at the center of all things. So, make that Christ-centered resolution. Dig deep in your soul and get connected to Christ, and then take what you find and pass it on with the hope the same Good News that brought life and hope to you will bring the same to others.

In the movie the “Shawshank Redemption” Andy DeFruesne, a banker who was wrongly convicted of murdering his wife finds himself in the Shawshank State Penitentiary, a brutal place run by a corrupt warden and his guards.

Andy, because of his professional abilities finds himself working in the warden’s office. One day finding himself alone in the office, he locks himself in and in an act of defiance plays a recording of Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro over the public address

system, hoping Mozart's music would bring, if only for an instant, a sense of beauty to such an ugly and brutal place.

After spending two weeks in solitary confinement Andy was finally returned to the dining hall for his first meal with the other inmates. While describing the beauty of the music to his buddies at the table he went on to say:

“Remember there are places in the world not made of stone. There's something inside you that they can't get to, they can't touch, that's only yours.”

“What are you talking about?” his best friend asks in bewilderment.

“Hope,” Andy replies.

Do you have hold of this hope? Dig deep and reach out and make yourself count for something. And remember this. The world system, what the Apostle Paul called the powers and principalities of this present age, or as Andy simply put it, “they” can't get to you or touch what's your's, because God through Christ gave it to you, the gift of grace deep within you that's deep enough to find for yourself and then pass on to others, even if it costs you something. Amen.