

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington December 31, 2006

January 1, 1978.

I am 15 years old and in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I have received for Christmas last week a “Snoopy 1978 Day by Day Calendar.”

Today I write my first entry in my new book.

“Today I start my book which I hope to keep for the rest of this year. I don’t really have any great resolutions for this New Year. I want to stop biting my fingernails, exercise and become a real outstanding person. Study efficiently and hard, develop piano work and have some time for painting, exercising and other pursuits beyond school. This year I feel I’ve got to put some of the pieces together. I can’t let the pressures of school ruin my life.”

If you are like me, tonight you may well sit down and write out your resolutions for 2007.

And if you are like most Americans you may well vow to:

spend more time with family and friends,

lose weight

quit smoking,

enjoy life more,

quit drinking,

get out of debt,

learn something new,

help others,

get organized,

reduce stress,

take a trip,

and get a better job.

But by December 31, 2007, 70% of the vows we make tonight we won’t have kept. For as any of us know who have successfully made a change in our lives, something on the inside of us has to change. We really have to want to make this change. And face it – change is hard and most of us really don’t want to. While the new may be priceless, the new is almost never costless. To say “Yes” to something new, means we also have to say “No” to other things.

Because we live between wanting to change and not really sure we want to, we get into ruts. We keep doing the same old thing again and again.

We get into ruts about how we live each day.

Our relationships get in ruts. Our friendships, families get in ruts.

Our country is like in one big long rut. Like us, all our country leaders seem to know how to do when we are stuck is to blame ourselves and try harder. So we vow to send more

troops into Iraq. Saddam Hussein is killed in the hope that when we bury his body we will bury the evil he has done as well. We are caught in a rut of an eye for an eye when what we need more than anything is to pour out our tears, our compassion for the world and its people.

In a time when our world needs faith so badly, how we live out our faith, practice our faith, can get in ruts as well.

It happens now, and it happened 2000 years ago. At the time of Jesus, the practice of Judaism in Israel had gotten into a rut. We hear it from the prophets, from Isaiah and Micah and Amos, "You have forgotten the poor, the widow, the stranger. Get back on track. Remember what it means to love God and love and care for one another."

The scripture for today is a pivot scripture in the Sermon on the Mount. It has to do with Jesus' relationship to the past and the new thing he is bringing about. I was puzzling over what our scripture reading meant when I remembered that Don Mackenzie and Rabbi Ted Falcon were working in Don's office on their book with Muslim teacher, Jamal Rahman, on interfaith dialogue.

I knocked on Don's door and asked for their help.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5:17-18)

"First of all", Rabbi Falcon said, the word translated 'law' here is not a good translation. What is meant here is 'Torah' or 'teaching'. The word 'law' seems to imply that Judaism is just a set of rules, do's and don'ts when what is meant here is the teaching of how to live out love of God and neighbor in one's life. By 'Torah' and the "prophets", Jesus means all of the scriptures. And when the scripture talks about 'not one letter or stroke of a letter', what is meant here are the little adornments or crowns that go on some Hebrew letters."

"Notice that Jesus didn't say I have come to 'do' the scriptures, or 'interpret' the scriptures or 'sum up' the scriptures. Instead I have come to 'fulfill' them. I see Jesus as a teacher of an 'inner path'. All religions start as an inner experience, an individual's encounter with God before they become institutionalized in a set of practices. Jesus as a teacher of the 'inner path' is calling people back to what had been lost in many of the forms and practices of Judaism in his time. He wanted to restore the heart of the Jewish faith. And the heart of that faith in Jesus' understanding was how we treat each other."

For Christians, that is what we have seen in Jesus. Here is one whose heart was at one with God's heart. He shows in his life and death and resurrection that way of Torah teaching and life. What Christians find in Jesus, Jews find in Torah, here is what shows us the heart of faith, how to love God and love neighbor.

The last two and a half weeks I have been learning a lot about the heart of faith. On Tuesday, December 12, I got a phone call from a doctor on the emergency ward at Harborview Hospital. "Dave had a biking accident...he has several fractures....he is going to be okay..." When I hung up the phone, I walked down the hall to Catherine's office. She opened the door and I burst into tears. She drove me to the emergency room where Don and later two other friends met me. And there began an 11 day journey at Harborview and the beginning of Dave's healing.

On the second night, I sat with a friend in the waiting room at the Trauma Surgery unit, and shared the dinner she had brought in for us. "This is a defining moment in your life", she said. "A defining moment?", I wondered. "For me I want my defining moments to come on stage with prizes. Defining moments happen in warm weather and with great food not in the Trauma Surgery waiting room sharing cold chicken for dinner!"

And yet, of course, this was and has been a defining moment in our lives. A defining period of time that has thrust us into a place of need. We have needed you and you have been there. You and family and friends have listened to us, comforted us, prayed with us when we could not pray, hoped for us. Dave and I can't thank you enough for all the ways you have shared your care, your cards, your letters, your prayers, your concern, your love. It has meant everything. And it has been healing. And Dave is home and doing well and even went off to preach this morning!

Part of Dave's healing has been to find an occasion to laugh everyday. One of our housemates suggested the movie, "Little Miss Sunshine" last week. It is a very strange movie. And for 9/10 of the movie I wondered what in the world was funny about it!

It's the story of a very dysfunctional family, the Hoovers, and their 15 year old son, Bryce and his 7 year old sister, Olive. Bryce wants more than anything to fly fighter jets and he so serious about his goal that he has taken a vow of silence until he gets into flight training school. He hasn't spoken for 9 months.

Olive and Bryce are playing a game in the backseat of their van when Bryce discovers that he is color blind. You can't be color blind and fly jets. He starts flipping out. He is banging the top of the van. banging the windows, shaking the seat. "Stop the van, pull over!", someone yells, "Bryce is freaking out!" The van pulls over and Bryce bolts from the van, runs down the hill and starts banging his head against the ground, wailing.

His mother goes down the hill to him. She tries to talk to him and all she gets in return is "Get out of here! Leave me alone! You are all a bunch of freaks! Losers! Leave me alone! I hate all of you!" She goes back up the hill.

The father turns to Olive, "Do you want to try?" Olive walks down the hill in these ridiculous plastic high heel shoes. She squats down by her brother, puts her arm around his shoulder, leans her head on his. Stays there.

"Alright", Bryce says, "We can go now." And they walk up the hill together.

“I’m sorry”, he says to his mom,” I was upset. I really didn’t mean all that.” And they drive on.

We have all been there and we will be there again– in that place of broken dreams, broken vows, broken lives. And in that place some of us have known an arm around us, a head resting on ours like Olive’s.

I am a Christian because that is where God finds me in Jesus. With his arm around me, his head resting on mine. “You are not alone”, he says to me again and again when I have forgotten.

And Jesus has come to me, been made real to me, in so many different ways in the faces and hands and arms of real people these last weeks. You have reminded me of faith and hope and love. And because of what you have reminded me of, and made real to me again, something else has happened as well.

One Sunday morning after some dark nights of the soul of worry and anxiety and fear, I sat on the edge of Dave’s bed at Harborview holding his hand. He was sort of waking up, there with his broken bones in his face, his neck brace and his body brace, his foot in a brace and with his shoulder that didn’t work.

Somewhere behind me the sun was rising and turning the buildings of downtown Seattle a beautiful pink. And as I watched the color rise, something else rose in me as well. Hope, the heart of faith, rising in me again.