What's Your Why?

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Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

Matthew 13:44-46, 51-52 (NRSVUE)

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied;
then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.
45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; **46** on finding one
pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." **52** And he said to them, "Therefore
every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a
household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

When the calendar turns from one year to the next, many of us also seek to turn the page in other aspects of our lives. As far back as 4,000 years ago, Babylonians made promises at the start of a new year to win favor with their pagan gods. During the reign of Julius Caesar, Romans adopted a new calendar that began with January, named after the Roman god Janus, who looked both backward and forward at the same time. In tribute, the Romans offered sacrifices at the beginning of the year and made promises to improve on the previous year.

In the 18th century, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, created a Covenant Renewal Service to be held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. That service included confession of sins from the previous year, the assurance of God's pardon, and a prayer of covenant renewal. That tradition lives on in Watch Night services, particularly within Black church traditions, a time for prayer and establishing resolutions for the coming year.

How many of you have made at least one New Year's resolution this year? According to a 2024 poll by the Pew Research Center, 30% of Americans make New Year's resolutions. Among young adults ages 18-29, that number increases to 49%. Just 18% of adults over 65 make New Year's resolutions, presumably either because they have grown more comfortable with themselves as they are or have stopped trying to convince themselves they'll follow through on making life changes. Overall, our success rate at keeping the resolutions we make isn't very high. Some estimates place that number at a dismal 9%.

Why do so many resolutions fail? According to many social scientists, the central issue is the kind of resolutions we make. Some are too big, like learning a new language, getting out of debt, writing a novel, or running a marathon. We do better with smaller, more achievable goals to start with, like learning a new word or phrase each week, paying off a credit card, writing a blog, or going for a run a few days a week. Some people make too many resolutions, attempting to alter several aspects of their life at once, instead of focusing on one thing at a time. Some resolutions simply aren't fun, like cutting out junk food or sweets, working out every morning, or reading academic books. Some people try to emulate the characteristics they admire in others, but end up trying to impose something on themselves that doesn't match their identity, whether that is a haircut, an outfit, a general demeanor, or a completely different personality. That isn't to suggest that none of those resolutions ever work; there are people in this congregation who have successfully kept resolutions to run a marathon, take on a new academic discipline, or finish writing a book. I don't happen to be among them.

Sometimes, it isn't the resolution itself that is the problem, but our readiness to make a change. Psychologist Terri Bly identifies five stages of change that humans go through before a change becomes lasting. The first stage, Precontemplation, is the first awareness that a change is needed. In the second stage, Contemplation, we begin to think about what it would be like to make a change. Preparation is the third stage, in which we put together a plan to make the change. That is followed by Action, when we finally make the change we desire. The final stage is Maintenance, when we adapt to retain whatever change we have made. Bly says that resolutions are more likely to stick if they come at the Action stage, but most resolutions come when we are thinking about a change but haven't really committed to a plan.

Committed or not, the most common reason our resolutions don't stick is that we focus on the wrong things. Before we attempt to make changes in our life, we need to be clear about why we want to make them. Our capacity to change depends on the strength of our motivation.

A example would be a resolution to go to the gym three days a week. That's a relatively popular New Year's resolution, at least if the ads we have been seeing over the past few weeks are any indication. Satirical website The Babylon Bee recently posted that Planet Fitness announced a new two-week membership plan for the millions of people who "resolve to briefly get back in shape." But, and this is a serious question, do you like going to the gym? Some people do. But if you hate it, you're going to need something more to motivate you. Why the gym? Do you aspire to lose weight? If so, then is your goal the weight itself, or to look better? Is your desire to look better for yourself or to others? Are you making that resolution because you want to feel better? How much discomfort are you willing to endure to get there? How will you know you've reached your goal? Is your motivation to be healthier? For yourself, or so you can be there for others? To prolong your life, or to improve your quality of life? Whatever is driving the change, we need first to identify the motivation, then determine if it is compelling enough to make us stick with it and deep enough for it to have lasting value. What's your "why?"

In our scripture lesson for today, Jesus offers two parables that seem to speak to the pursuit of our "why."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Find what matters most, then marshal all your resources in pursuit of it. These two parables are part of a larger collection. The Gospel of Matthew organizes Jesus's teaching into five discourses, or blocks of writing. The first is the Sermon on the Mount, the second is the Missionary Discourse. Our passage comes from the third discourse, the Parables of the Kingdom. The remaining two are about life in the church and the end times. Obviously, when Jesus talks about treasure hidden in a field and a pearl of great value, he isn't talking about New Year's resolutions; he is talking about the kingdom of God he came to proclaim. This way of life is so precious that everything else should be put to use in pursuing it.

But this guidance applies both to our faith and to the resolutions we make in our daily lives. Some goals don't motivate us, and others aren't worth the effort. But if we identify a goal truly worth pursuing, we should go after it with everything we've got.

Several years ago, I had a friend I will call Valerie. Valerie had a long-term boyfriend who none of us around her really liked. We found him to be shallow and self-centered. But

Valerie vigorously defended him, and she determined that he was the person she wanted to marry. She was drawn to him for his internal drive and motivation toward the future. His singular goal, as she described it, was that he wanted to have a million dollars by the time he was 30. To Valerie, that goal represented the promise of prosperity, a man who would provide for her and for the family they would have together.

We fell out of touch, as people do over the years. But a few years ago, she contacted me to catch up. She had, in fact, married the guy she'd dated all those years before, and they had two children together. And, to his credit, he reached his goal of having a million dollars by the time he was 30. But to get there, he worked long hours, seven days a week. When he got home, he would eat quickly, then retreat to his home office to manage his investments. He missed most of his kids' activities, and his relationship with his kids and with her was distant, at best. Once he'd reached his goal, he became even more disconnected. He quit his job. But instead of spending more time with his family, picking up a hobby, or enjoying what he had achieved, he became obsessed with protecting his wealth and growing it. Their marriage soon ended. He agreed to a reasonable alimony and child support, but made no effort to share custody.

It is a good thing to make resolutions and to seek to better ourselves. But we have to make sure to focus on what matters most. If our priorities are in the wrong place, we can miss the goal even if we hit the target. What's your "why"?

One resolution you might consider in this new year is to grow in your faith. We do that best when our goals are specific and realistic. You might seriously pursue one or more of our essential practices at Church of the Saviour, like reading five verses of scripture a day or taking time out of your day to pray. You could try the weekly Morning Prayer service on Wednesdays or check out a small group or short-term study. If you're more ambitious, you could form a new small group with others. If something bigger is in your wheelhouse, you could follow a plan to read the Bible in a year, volunteer with children's ministry, or set aside a week to assist on the youth mission trip in the summer. If that's too much for you physically, you could send cards to homebound members or make phone calls to help people stay connected.

Jesus concluded his teaching about the kingdom of God by saying, "Every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." Value is not restricted to the latest and greatest things, nor does age alone increase their worth. The "new" does not replace the "old." And just because a practice has been around for a long time doesn't mean it's the best way. Jesus said earlier in Matthew that he didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. The covenant of Jesus does not supersede God's earlier covenants. Both are treasures, and both are necessary.

Likewise, resolutions should not be about creating a "new you." You have value and worth, just as you are. Better than becoming the "you" you have always wanted to be is to focus on being more fully who God made you to be. The world works hard to distort that image, to convince us of a standard we have to live up to that God never intended. Let's not let a marketing scheme or an unrealistic standard drive our identity. In this new year, maybe you need to adopt a new posture or a new practice to grow in grace. Sometimes, the "old" needs to be reclaimed and renewed. Renewal comes by leaning more fully on God. In nearly the final words of the Bible, God says, "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

New year, new you? Instead of a "new you," how about living into the fullness of God's hope for your life, to be more completely the "you" you were made to be? That's a why worth pursuing. Amen.

2537 Lee Rd., Cleveland Heights, OH, 44118 | 216-321-8880 | cotsumc.org