

A NEW, NEW YEAR

Psalm 51:10

There are some things that it is possible to fix after we have started. If you miss counting a stitch and discover it right away, it isn't too hard to undo the wrong stitch and then do it right. We can erase a figure we write down in pencil or redo electronically with our computers. But there are other things we can't fix. We just have to start all over again. If you scorch a cream or cheese sauce, you can't fix it. You are stuck with the burnt taste. If I put too little seasoning in something, I can add more. But if I put too much in, then I can't take it out. I have to start all over again. You can't paint over rotten wood. The wood has to be replaced. You can't build on a weak foundation—you can, but it will sink and ruin the building.

Jesus talked about that when He stated that you don't patch an old garment with new fabric. The new fabric will shrink and tear away from the old, making things even worse. He also said that you didn't put new wine in an old wine skin. The new wine would still ferment, give off gas, and bust a hole in the old skin, which would no longer give. Putting something new and good looking on something old and rotten will not fix things. It only makes things worse.

We approach the New Year. People make their resolutions thinking that the New Year will be a new chance to improve their lives. We know how often those resolutions fail. But why? A perfect example is weight loss. There are hundreds of diet plans out there. People can go on them and amazingly lose the pounds. But they find that losing weight and keeping it off are two different things. They find out that even with a diet plan, they are still the same person who likes to overeat, eat too much of the wrong things, do too little exercise, and eat just out of habit. Without an internal change they can't make the same old person keep off those pounds. The New Year is only "new" in the sense that we make it so arbitrarily. The end of December and June are definitely times of significance, because we experience the shortest and longest days of the year. And we know that not only because of the amount of light we see, but the angle of that light and the coldness or warmth that angle causes. But January 1 is the beginning of a New Year because we have just set it that way. It could be February 1 or June 13 or October 22. There is nothing more new about that day than most others except the day off we may have and all the bowl games on TV.

That is what can be wrong about our thoughts about being "new" as people. St. Paul tells us that as Christians we are new. So the idea can be in our minds that as a Christian I should be better, "newer" than I would be otherwise. Yet, even though I have been baptized, even though I go to church, even though I study the Bible, even though I go to the Lord's Supper, I find that I am still the same old person. I still have my bad habits—I bite my nails, I blame my wife for

my frustrations, I rush through things, I eat the wrong things and don't exercise like I should. And as I get older, it seems like those things get worse. I don't have the energy I used to have to work at things like I used to, so I more stubbornly hold on to my shortcomings. When you paint a house, you first need to scrape off the old paint. That is a whole lot worse when you do it over old wood. It isn't just the old paint that has to go, much of the old wood needs replacing. It is like thinking that a new set of clothes will cure me of arthritis, hearing loss, wobbly knees, and acid reflux.

The result is either that I kind of blow it off or I despair because I always fall so short of what I should be. And in our world of comfort, it is so easy to just blow things off. Death is something you think a lot more of if life now is so bad. Years ago and in the Third World, life had been a daily struggle of fighting hunger, hard labor, a drab existence, little stimulation, and discomfort. You think a lot more about death as a way out of it, so it is easy to concentrate on being ready for death—to be a better person. But we can keep our minds off of that in our homes with central heating, our full refrigerators, our TV's and books, our free time, and our ability to travel without having to walk it ourselves. So, I just live in the same, old way.

But when God speaks about new, He is not talking about a new coat of paint or a simple attitude change. In the language of the Bible “new” is something God creates. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” “Create” involves starting with nothing. You don't reshape something that is already there. God created the word without anything. He just spoke and it happened. So if we are really to be new, it is not a matter of what we adjust, but what God says.

The God who said, “Let there be,” and there was light or land or sky or trees or animals is also the God who said, “Let there be,” and it was in Jesus. Jesus on the cross said, “It is finished,” and so was His mission of taking away our sins. In Jesus, God says, “Your sins are forgiven. You are new.”

But do we feel “new”? I still have the same aging body, the body I have misused by overeating and lack of exercise and sleep. I still have the same old bad habits. I am still the same person who frustrates those close to me. I am still the same person who has seen loved ones lost and miss them. What is “new” about that?

In Jesus, God did not create me to be a different person, a perfect person. I am still the same person with the same weaknesses, same problems, same sins. But the difference is now my relationship with God. Instead of being cut off from Him in rebelling, I am accepted and forgiven by Him. So instead of having to run away from Him as Adam and Eve did or ignoring Him as we often do, we can come to Him. That is what makes us new. It is like a marriage. A person doesn't magically change when the pastor says, “I pronounce you husband and wife.”

But that person is part of a new relationship. And that relationship does make a person change. But before that comes that relationship.

Think of how we can be helped by a relationship with a person who is good to us. But even then no one just shares good with us. We are all sinners. But in a relationship with God, we only receive what is good for us. Think of what that acceptance can mean. We meet a celebrity like a star athlete or heroic leader. That can be a renewing, positive experience, How much better can it be to meet God. If someone important accepts us, then we feel more accepted. How much better to be accepted by God. Someone befriends us. We feel worthwhile. How much more worthwhile when we have Jesus as our brother.

So what makes things new is not what we say about or what we do, but what God creates in us because we are accepted by Him. His forgiveness and acceptance makes us more forgiving and accepting, but we don't look to what happens in us to be renewed. We look to the one who accepts and renews us.

We don't need a New Year to do that. God wants to come to us new each day—new each moment. In a relationship you don't just say, "I love you," and that is that. You say it again and again in many ways—hugs, gifts, compliments, words of encouragement. That is what God does to us in Baptism, Holy Communion, confession and forgiveness, the study of His Word, and being with other Christians. In response we say, "I love You," back to Him by doing those things for others.