

“Reflections”
Sermon by Gail Claus, Lay Assoc. Pastor
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I can think of no better way to start the New Year than with talking about reflections. Reflections can be both looking forward, and looking back. It almost sounds like we are looking at last year’s resolutions, and making resolutions for the New Year, except at a deeper level. Do we reflect on the past or do we reflect on the future? I personally look to both. Did I grow last year? What do I look for in growth this new year? Many of us are happy with where we are and what we believe, and that is perfectly fine. I want to share a little about my reflections. Perhaps you can relate to some of this.

Last year I grew tremendously in my faith through studying with adult education classes and a spirituality group. But that is not the only way my faith grew. Daily Bible reading and contemplation at home, devotions at groups to which I belong, conversation with others, both spiritually and socially have all helped me grow as a person.

On the lighter side of life, I have begun to learn not to take myself so seriously and to be able to laugh at my mistakes and myself. At least I am learning to do that. And I intend to continue to look for this lightness in life in the coming year. After all, the pursuit of perfection is not necessarily worth the effort and sacrifice. My pursuit of perfection is being thrown out the window! I’ve finally realized perfection is God’s work in each of us.

Patience is another area in which I find the need for growth. I momentarily achieved it this week after a two-hour phone call with Amazon over something that in my mind ought to have taken ten minutes. I’ll admit, this degree of patience is new for me, and an area for much continued growth.

There is so much room for growth in my life. What about yours? Can you reflect over the last year and see how you have grown, changed an attitude or simply found peace?

I’d also like to look forward a bit more. My personal faith is only one area I can reflect upon. I want to learn to add more spirituality to my faith, and to find myself closer to God. And to those who are comfortable in their faith, rest assured that is just fine and I am somewhat envious of you. I have a yearning to study, reflect and hopefully reach a deeper understanding of God and Jesus.

Growth is something I aspire to in my whole life. Understanding myself so that I can better interact with others is paramount. Being burdened by my past is a no-win situation. A favorite quote of mine that is attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt is:

“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present.”

Now I'd like to shift my reflections to our church. When I reflect on St. John's over the past year I see many areas for us to find satisfaction. I'm going to mention a few; there are many more.

We have maintained our many small groups and adult education. The books studied in small groups have such a wide span of topics! And the variety in adult education continues to thrive. We offer courses in both traditional and progressive Christianity.

Our mission work far outweighs our size of church. We work extensively right here in Rohnert Park with NOAH and COTS, collecting coats and blankets for the poor and homeless, and we work internationally with our sister church in Tocopilla, Chile.

We have become intentional about being an open, welcoming congregation. We had a balanced budget and paid our full apportionments and asking's to the district. We are a church committed to its financial responsibility.

We've seen beautiful altars and banners, had very successful all-church dinners, seen the growth of United Methodist Men a.k.a. The Men's Breakfast group. United Methodist Women continue to thrive in their missions.

A significant area of growth for us was yet another change of pastors. With each pastor change we are called upon to demonstrate the loving, welcoming church that we are. And we are called to lovingly accept the changes each pastor brings to us.

The closer I have seen the church, the more volunteers I see. Many take on jobs that are transparent to most of us, but critical to the function of St. John's. Cheers and gratitude are in order to our many volunteers and staff that work with limited resources, but are still able to keep us a vital church in the community.

Can you see why I am exhilarated about our church? What excites you about the past year? Can you reflect upon 2011?

Looking to the future I see even more excitement. Newer and younger members are taking on more responsibility and have joined committees. Fresh thoughts and insight are always good for the various committees. We will continue to be kept up to date on the activities and needs of the church through our newsletter, The Mustard Seed, and the weekly bulletin insert, The Sojourner.

This year we will find our way to a balanced budget, growth in the number of spirituality groups, and additional adult education offerings. We have an active Angel's on call ministry and people who serve as angels on their own. We are indeed a caring church. That's exciting! My dream for the coming year is to see the needs of all of our congregation fulfilled.

There is a lot of excitement and energy in the congregation. We can focus that energy into channels that provide service or opportunities for all of our members. We have much to give and receive within our church.

Last Sunday was Christmas. Everyone knows that it is better to give than receive. At this time of year, one of the best parts of receiving a gift is the anticipation and the excitement that comes with unwrapping the gift.

Did you stop to think that God gave us the greatest gift on that first Christmas? The passage from Galatians we heard Shane read this morning is Paul's succinct dissertation on the basic meaning for Jesus' life. Paul is emphasizing that we are full heirs of God – 'adopted by God.' Let's look at this short passage again:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

What is this passage saying to us as individuals?

Paul has written about God's great gift to us. It is a short, concise teaching of the *meaning* of Jesus' teachings, not the teachings themselves. Think of this as a present we are about to unwrap – God's present to we human beings. We need to find that same sense of anticipation and excitement as we did last weekend when we opened our gifts.

The great gift we will find is that Paul reveals to us Jesus, his mission and his ministry.

By saying that God sent his son, born of a woman, Paul makes clear to us that Jesus is fully human and born under Jewish law. Paul sees this as an enslaved human condition. But then comes a gift! By responding to and accepting the meanings of Jesus' teachings, we find the freedom found by being adopted by God.

What a gift to humankind! It is there for us to unwrap and choose to accept and be adopted by God or not. Jesus shows us the way. In this verse we can see the roles of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Father, God, sends Jesus 'born of woman,' and the Holy Spirit, here called "the Spirit of his Son," to help us see and accept our gift of the divine trinity. Think of the prayer Jesus taught the disciples and us to pray every worship service, "Our Father who art in heaven..."

Going back to our reflections, can you remember the distant past to Jesus and how it has changed your life? Can you remember and reflect upon the last year? It is important to remember that the recent past and anticipated future is small compared to that which lies in our hearts and actions.

As a closing comment I would simply like to extend my wish that you reflect on the many blessings in your life. No matter what our condition, we all have many blessings, past and future.

Amen.