

“If you always do what you have always done, you’ll always get what you’ve got.”

Preface to the message

The text for today is from the gospel of James. I wish to share a “coincidence” so to speak about the choice of James as the Scripture reference for today. I began my initial preparation for this message about two weeks ago. The James passage seemed to be well suited to a new year’s message related to making New Year’s resolutions: do not be just hearers of the word, but doers. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I found out that Lynell had chosen the book of James as the next focus for the New Year sermon series. She, too, is planning to focus on ways to become better disciples of Jesus. Neither of us had previously shared our plans, but both of us were looking at how to be more action oriented. She told me by all means to proceed with my message and that this was not just a “coincidence,” but the action of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: James 1: 22-27

The Message

How many of you made a new year’s resolution? So let’s be honest. How many of you do not make any resolutions because you usually do not keep them? Well, I made the same resolution I have made many times before: to lose weight and get more exercise. Did you know those are the two most common resolutions people make? As a rule, 64% of New Year’s resolutions are dropped by the first month after they are made. After reading about new year’s resolutions, I discovered that resolutions involve changing habits. That is obvious, but what is interesting is that habits govern our lives and help us to engage in a multitude of tasks without overloading our brain’s circuits. I do not know about your brain circuits, but mine are at full capacity and are starting to short out more frequently than I would wish.

All joking aside, the way habits work is pretty interesting. Every habit has a cue and a reward. Let’s say you go for a workout every day and you feel refreshed. Then the cue is leaving to go for the workout and the reward is feeling energized. I had an interesting insight into cues and rewards recently mostly because I was

thinking about this message. I was about to leave the house, so I picked up my keys and opened the door. I put the keys in the door, getting ready to lock it. Just then I realized that I did not need to because Richard was at home. Here again it was a habit, an automatic action to leave the house and lock the door.

In the James passage for today, he stresses that we must be more than hearers of the word, we must be doers of the word. He made a comparison to looking in the mirror briefly and then going about our business. That is what he means by only hearers of the word. It behooves us to take a closer look at our discipleship and pay attention to our focus. To my mind this means as James says, be doers who act. For us to be better “doers,” we may need some new habits and develop some new cues.

In an article I read about making new habits, there were some concrete suggestions for how to improve our spiritual disciplines. There was two of particular interest related to improving our praying. One was called to pray continually. Now do not panic. I am not advocating that we spend our entire waking moments praying. However, this little tip would help us to pray more often even if we are busy. The new cue is “take a sip.” Most of us drink something throughout the day such as coffee, bottled water or juice. So each time you pause to take a sip, use that brief moment to remind yourself to pray. The second tip is called “walking in the Spirit.” We are familiar with the gifts of the Spirit, but are we consciously taking time to become aware of the activity of the Spirit? So give this a try: let actual walking become a cue for walking in the Spirit. When you walk from your car into church, the office, the store, take a moment to recognize the activity of the Spirit in your life. What might the Spirit be encouraging you to do? We can’t hear the Spirit without being receptive, without making time to listen for the nudging.

Another activity that has caught my attention is called Gifts from the Heart, an initiative sponsored by the Presbyterian Disaster Relief organization. They have sent out a request for churches to assemble kits that can be used to help people who have been displaced by natural disasters, such as the fires in California. The three kits are hygiene kits, school kits and clean up buckets. Brocc Snyder has the information and we may be participating in gathering and assembling kits to ship back to the Presbyterian Relief Committee. This has received positive responses from some members of the session and from the residents at High Point who

would help assemble kits. I am hopeful that this will evolve into a Faith In Action project.

Another way we will become “doers” is the possibility of helping at Kibler Elementary School. We have heard from Pastor Lynell that there are two ways to interact with the kids. One is to join them for lunch one day a week. Another is to help them play math games. The school is willing to coach us on these activities.

What you may notice about these activities is that they are different from some of the things we have usually done. If we take on any or all of these projects, it will help us to break out of the business as usual mode and expand our boundaries more into the community. It is not that we have not done service projects before; we have. However, these projects will help Calvary to keep fresh and develop new ways of being servants of our Lord. We may not do too well on our same old new years’ resolutions, but we could develop new habits with some really remarkable rewards. Not just rewards for those who we help, but rewards for ourselves. I cannot say that I will lose weight and get fit this year any more than I did in previous years. But I look forward to trying something new. Let’s resolve to do this together.