

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
January 5 & 6, 2013
John Crosby
RENEWED: Taking Inventory
2 Corinthians 4**

Those beginning-of-the-year or birthday exams that [my wife] Laura was talking about are a delight for kids. They stretch and show how much they've grown. They can't wait to tell you what they've learned or what lies ahead for them. Review is not a problem for a child when it is about a measuring stick, but all too quickly it turns into something that we fear instead of something we are looking forward to, right? By the time these kids are 15 or 16 years old, they will be participating in a national test to determine whether they or their school are failing or succeeding. They will move on to performance reviews that tell them whether they get raises or get fired. They will be subjected to weigh-ins, certainly the most disgusting thing ever invented by human beings! Is there anything grimmer than that, any better way? And then at the beginning of the year, if you look back and you look ahead, how do you measure what is not measurable? How do you measure what is invisible because it is happening inside you?

I had a beginning-of-the-year encounter with God as I read Paul's 2nd Letter to the Church in Corinth, chapter 4. It said this to me.

4 Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

Apparently some of them were losing heart.

² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.... ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves...

Remember that, John. It's right there in the Bible.

⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

In other words, my job is to talk in ways that bring the light of God's good news into your hearts in ways that increase its shininess. One of the ways we evaluate ourselves is whether there is more light or less. The last statement says that God made His light shine in our hearts. Let's continue responsively in this passage from 2nd Corinthians 4. It's up on the screen.

John Crosby: ⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

People: ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

John Crosby: We are ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

People: ¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart.

So first Paul says it to the pastors, “We don’t lose heart.” Then he says it to the people, “Therefore we don’t lose heart.”

John Crosby: ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

People: ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

The unseen that we can’t wrap a tape measure around or put on a scale is what really counts, but it is invisible. This passage, saying that God’s light is put into our hearts to shine, has been a powerful one for me over the years. Fourteen years ago (I remember exactly when it was) we were in the old sanctuary and I preached this passage. I talked about how the life of faith is God putting into our hearts His treasure, and we are like these beautiful clay jars. I started to toss a jar around and then on purpose, I dropped it and it crashed. It exploded all over the chancel. I said, “That’s my problem. That’s me. I’m not just cracked. I’m broken, and so if it’s about how well I am polishing the jar, I am in trouble.” Then I said, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” I reached down and uprighted part of the jar to illustrate that the light that comes from inside is what is seen. (*Slide shown.*) You can see it better up on the screen. This is what we should focus on. Not on the quality of the jar but on the quality of the light that God wants to bring into your heart and into mine.

What if that means that spiritual people are not the ones whose jars look the best? What if it’s about the people who have more cracks than others but there is somehow light shining from the inside? That is what we are supposed to be talking about. This could be a community where we confess our brokenness instead of our togetherness. What if we were all cracked pots? What if growth looked like that and not a bigger, more beautiful jar in 2013? What if trouble and failure is what God uses most? Paul says, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

What if there *is* no master plan? The pastor always talks about: if you memorize these six verses, if you give this much money, if you go on this mission trip, you will grow spiritually. What if that is not right? What if there is a different plan for each one of us and 2013 is a time for you to see that just as you are different from the person sitting next to you, God wants to grow you differently? John Ortberg talks about it this way. He says God “had Abraham take a walk, Elijah take a nap, Joshua take seven laps; He gave Moses a 40-year time out, He gave David a harp, and He gave Paul a pen. He wrestled with Jacob, argued with Job, whispered to Elijah, warned Cain, and comforted Hagar. He gave Aaron an altar, Miriam a song, Gideon a fleece, Peter a

new name. Jesus was stern with the rich young ruler, tender with the woman caught in adultery, patient with the disciples, blistering with the priests, gentle with the children, and gracious with the thief on the cross.”

God is not fair. Thank God! Thank God that He treats each one of us as if He knows us exactly, never growing two people the same way. God is not a mass-producer. God is a hand-crafter. Trying to grow people spiritually without taking into account who you are would be like trying to grow children on an assembly line. If you train an 80-pound gymnast and a 300-pound linebacker and treat them exactly the same, you will end up with two useless 190-pound people who can neither go on the balance beam nor the football field. The problem that most of us have is that we listen to the expert, maybe the pastor, talk about what the pastor does and then you think that is what you are supposed to do. When that does not work for you, and it will not work for you because you are a different person, you feel guilty or inadequate, and you give up for the year.

Well, we are at the start of a new year. How could God help you to grow? How could the light shine more light into the darkness? How do we get there? This is your turn. I'm so glad to be a part of a community that is willing to take some risks and once a year we do that. There are baskets at the end of each of the aisles containing envelopes and pens. I would ask each of you to take an envelope and a pen and pass the basket down the aisle.

All of us are going to do two things, but if you don't do anything else, I would ask you to just do this. Each envelope has inside a smaller envelope and a little inventory. Would you put your own address on the outside envelope. If you want to send it to somebody else, that's fine, but it would probably be best if you sent it to yourself. Then if you would, also put your address on the smaller envelope. I'm going to do this myself so I can see how long it takes. Some of you are already done. Some of you are not going to do it. Some of you are still scrambling. We'll give you plenty of time.

Our mission statement is patterned around the idea that we want to be a community that brings life and light to the inside of your heart so that the light can get out into the world. Whatever your age, wherever you are, we want to offer you the opportunity to see whether there is more or less light shining in the darkness. While we believe that everybody is different, we feel there are some general categories where all of us could ask how am I doing, not compared with the person next to me but compared with how I used to be or how I would like to be. So we would like to take the next ten minutes and do this together.

If you open up the envelope you will see a Spiritual Inventory with a lot of lines. We have broken our mission statement up into three parts. We want to inspire all generations to follow Jesus, to love others, to live missionally. How are you doing in those three areas?

The first part of getting light on the inside is deciding to **Follow Jesus**. What we've done is put a little scale there. If you are on the far right, you are Billy Graham. If you are on the far left, you are me. How are you doing when it comes to following Jesus?

1. Look at whether you are able to receive God's love and forgiveness and mark yourself on the scale.

What is your next step in that process? Stop just for a second! It's been better than 14 years since I lifted this jar up and the reason that I know that is because after that service Jim came up to me and he said, "This is my first day in this church. Is it always like this?" I couldn't tell him any different. He said, "We came here for the first time as a family, and when you dropped the jar and it shattered, I started to cry because my wife and I aren't going to get divorced, I think, and a big part of that is because our child who sits between us is breaking both of our hearts. When you dropped the jar, I was so glad I could stop pretending. When you talked about God coming into our hearts, I just sat there and I said, 'Jesus, Jesus, please help me.' John, I just wanted you to know that." Back to the inventory.

2. Do you admit you are a cracked pot and ask Jesus to help you? Do you try to learn about the character and priorities of Jesus?
3. Do you follow Jesus, not just out of duty but because maybe this is the way He wants you to live?
4. Following Jesus means learning to talk to God, learning to listen.
5. Do I listen for God to speak to me through the Bible, to direct my way to be His way?
6. Then I believe that part of following Jesus is coming here and being reinforced.

How are you doing in any of that? What I would suggest we do in each of these three areas is to mark one of them with a plus sign. That shows that I know I'm not where I should be, I'm not where I could be, but thank God, I'm not where I used to be. Is there any one of these three areas where you feel like in the last year you are doing better? For me as a fairly perfectionist type of person, I put down that I feel like I've made a little progress in receiving God's grace this year. But put a plus sign wherever it is for you.

Then look back and say, if there were one of these I would want to be better at, which one would it be? All of them, of course, but which one strikes me right now? Circle **Follow Jesus**, **Love Others**, or **Live Missionally**.

When we say that we **Love Others**, that is a tangible expression of how we are trying to love God. Yesterday afternoon Rich [Rich Phenow, Pastor of Congregational Care/Lay Empowerment] and the lay team did a funeral for a 23-year-old young man. Killed in an accident. Not a part of this church, and hundreds of young men and young women came in here with tears in their eyes needing love and hope. And you, many of you in this community, offered them Kleenex and hugged them. You made them cookies and lemonade and coffee. You offered for them not just prayers but song. Many of them walked out of here feeling loved.

1. As we live that kind of life, are we demonstrating compassion for the people who are hurting?
2. Do you feel like your faith ever affects your family relationships? Do you actually ever ask for forgiveness?
3. Does your faith affect your work? Would you ever pray for your boss?
4. Are you part of a group that encourages you to grow?
5. Are you in relationship with somebody other than your spouse if you're married, somebody who will tell you the truth?
6. And when I say forgiveness, who do you think of?

So again, if having more light on the inside is learning to Follow Jesus and Love Others, which of these would you put a plus next to? And in small ways, maybe you *are* doing a little bit more.

Which of these would you most like help with? Circle that. One of my mentors is a dead man named George MacDonald, an author, and he said, "There is nothing so dangerous to the soul as the constant touching of holy things." In other words, the ones most in danger of losing their souls are the pastors. So on mine this year I circled that I wanted to have my faith impact my work. Not my blah, blah-blah, blah-blah talk but my *weak* work.

Let's talk for a minute about this third aspect, LIVE MISSIONALLY. We say here that we want people to live missionally. But we do not want you to become missionaries in the Congo, and we do not think this means you should get up on a corner in north Minneapolis and start haranguing people. Instead, we believe that missional living is what happens when people with light in their cracked lives walk out of this building and meet other people—whether that is Mission Chicago that our youth just got back from or Families Moving Forward where we served the homeless or one of you turning to a coworker and saying, "I'll pray for you." That is all missional.

1. Do you feel this year like you have used any of the gifts that God has given you to serve others?
2. Would anybody ever know that you know Jesus?
3. I don't doubt two people would know that you're a nice person but would they suspect it's because you're from Minnesota? Would they know that Jesus is involved? Either because you can tell them your own story or because you would invite them?
4. Do people see a difference in your character from who you used to be to who you're becoming?
5. The second to the last one is interesting. Are you starting to honor your God with your spending habits? It says *giving* here, what if we substitute the word *generosity*? Are you a more generous person than you were a year ago regardless of how much you have left over?
6. And have you gotten out of your comfort zone to serve anybody else? Those are just some signs of missional living.

Again put a plus next to anything you feel good about. Anything! Any one thing. And maybe if there is something that you feel like you would like to be becoming, where would you like to see that light shining? What would you circle?

Okay, the last panel says **Next Steps**. We've been doing this survey for about four years. I used to say, write down one thing in each of these categories, Follow Jesus, Love Others, Live Missionally. Don't do that because you *won't* do that. Just write down one thing. Write down one that by the grace of God you would think about again on the Fourth of July or next Labor Day say, "Oh, yeah...." Think of one thing that tomorrow you would want to believe is starting to happen in you.

So now comes the hard part where we have to follow instructions. Do not lick the envelopes. This is very easy. Take the inventory and just put it with the small envelope into the big envelope. Make sure that both envelopes are addressed to you. Here is what we are going to do. Nobody is going to look at the Spiritual Inventory. This is between you and God. All we want to do is take it and run it through a copy machine to make an extra copy. We will send the original back to you by the end of the month. We will put the copy, which nobody will see, into the smaller envelope and mail it to you in the last quarter of the year, by next Christmas. How many of you received one of these envelopes at the end of last year? Yes, about a third of you

did this last year. We sent it to you as a reminder, so you would have a chance to see how it's going.

No one is going to look at this unless you want us to, but on the front of the envelope, there is a place where it says, "I'd like to have my inventory reviewed by a pastor or an elder." Probably a thousand of you checked this box last year and handed them in. Probably 600 of you said, "I'd love it if one of you would pray for me or give me a sentence of advice." We took all 600 of those and our staff and our elders and Laura and I read the inventories you wanted read and just wrote a note that said we are praying for you. We would be delighted to do that, otherwise this is just between you and God. As you leave today, the ushers will have baskets at the back door and you can just drop the envelopes in. That would be great.

We try to do this toward the beginning of the year because we believe that, as I said in my prayer, just like the snow gives us a new start, God wants to give all of us a new start. When the light goes out, God wants to refresh us. When I have messed up again, God wants to remind me that I am beloved, just like you are.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.