

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Taking Inventory
James 1:23-25; 1Corinthians 11:28-32

New Year's is traditionally the time to talk about New Year's resolutions with the sense of looking back and seeing how we have done and then looking ahead and seeing what we want to change. For children, that's not a problem at all. As Laura described, we ask them "How much do you weigh?" and they jump on the scale and want to see. They run home with their little pictures from kindergarten and first and second and third grades and say, "Look at this! Look at this!" They stretch when we notice how much they have grown. Then, almost instantly it seems, they get to school and it turns into midterms, which they dread, or the SATs, which they think will change their lives. Then it's a job interview that determines whether they get the job, or a job review that determines whether they keep the job, and instead of stretching up to see how much they've grown, they are forced to step on the scales again or to have a colonoscopy. How fun is this, really? Happy New Year!

We need to change the paradigm. We need to think of new ways of measurement that can help us and bring life and hope, because people *do* change. God is in the business of changing people even when we cannot see it. I think God sometimes has a sense of humor. I was talking with Laura recently about a couple I hadn't seen for a couple of months. "What have you done, Laura, to make them angry at us? I haven't seen them in church," and then, sure enough, that very next day, I'm in a line—a long line—and right behind me walks the husband of the couple I was talking about. It was like, "Okay, I get the hint. I'm supposed to talk to him." So I turned and said, "Hi, Dexter," I'll just make up his name. "Hi, Dexter, how're you doing?" He says, "I'm good. I'm there. I'm good." We start to talk, it's a long line, and so I say, "Well, how *are* you?"

He says, "John, you haven't seen us as much on the weekends but I've been coming during the week." I said, "Oh," thinking maybe he was going into the chapel to pray. "Yeah, I've been coming to Al-Anon." And I said, "I didn't know." He said, "It's a problem. Nobody knows. But her disease has been ruining her life and our family and my life for over a decade and, John, I've got to tell you, this has been the best year for me ever! She is no better but God has shown me that it's not my fault and that I cannot change her. And as I have gotten healthier, I think we are getting healthier. God has changed us." How do you measure that? I don't know, but I think it's terribly important to look back and not miss where God is working in your life or mine. How do you measure what is invisible because it is happening inside you?

A friend named Bob Shank talks about a different kind of metaphor for measuring. He says, "**What stays on your list?**" All of us have a list. In different seasons of your life, there are different kinds of lists but everybody has a list. In the first third of life, you know what you have? You have a *wish list*. You know exactly what you want to ask Santa for. You know exactly what

you need in terms of school or a life mate or something else. You have a wish list and you check things off and are obsessed about the things that are still on it.

Then he says, “In the second third of your life, the wish list doesn’t go away but it’s replaced by another list, the *to-do list*.” You have stuff that you’ve got to do. Every morning when you wake up, the list stares at you. If you are married, it’s a little bit of a longer list, but it keeps going and you measure progress by how much stuff you scratch off and how much you’ve done.

Then, not always but for some of you, the wish list gains new perspective. You realize the to-do list will never be finished and some of you start to develop a *bucket list*. We’ve talked about that in the past. It’s not a selfish list. It’s the idea that there ought to be things that you do before you die. Some of them are dreams and some of them are experiences. Shank says the important thing is, depending on what season you are living, **what do you want to end up with?** I’ve got to tell you, whether it’s a wish list, a to-do list, or a bucket list, you will never end up somewhere you didn’t intend to go. Put another way, you will never end up over there unless you decide what is over there and head there. You will just wander around. That’s why direction is so important. Where do you want to end up? Who do you want to end up becoming this year? The apostle James says it this way:

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. **23** Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror **24** and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like. **25** But those who look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom,

That’s a phrase I’d like to think about, the perfect law that gives freedom.

25 But those who look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continue in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do [James 1:22-25].

I want each of us to look in the mirror this morning. Wherever you are on your journey of faith—some of you may be just barely hanging on, others of you have done this long enough that God is very real to you—but wherever you are, I would love you to start this year with just ten minutes of looking into your hearts and I’d like to help you with that. In each pew in the middle aisle there should be some baskets. You may have to scoot down and get one, but if you don’t mind, everybody sitting in the middle aisle should take a basket, take an envelope and a pen out and pass it all the way down. You can leave it at the other end of the aisle.

I would like us to begin this by doing two things, but first let me give you a little overview because some of us are adults and we like to hear all the details of a thing before we do anything. This is the fifth year, in seven or eight years (we haven’t done it every year), but this is the fifth year that we have done what is called a Spiritual Inventory. It’s a spiritual check-up where you take just ten minutes with me and look at your life. This is just between you and God. I’m going to ask you to take a chance and do it because you never know, you might actually learn something, but this is between you and God. When you have completed the Inventory, I would ask you to put the Inventory and that other envelope back into the big envelope and pass it back down. We’ll talk about the details later.

What we want to do is to take the Inventories, several hundred of them—nobody looks at them—but we will make a photocopy for you. We will mail you back your original right away and then at the end of the year, we will mail you the copy that we made. Did anybody get one of these in the mail this last month? Did anybody receive one? Exactly. Look around. It's a refresher of how you are doing today. So to help us do that, we would ask you to take a minute and address both of the envelopes. I'll do it up here so I can figure how long it will take us to do that.

One of our young members did an interview with me late this fall and said, "You know, my first day here, we did this weird thing where everybody wrote themselves a note. I said, "Did that make you want to come back or run away?" He said, "Yes."

Some of you are still addressing. Some of you need a minute more. That is absolutely fine. What I'd like you to do is, on the front of the Inventory, I'd like you to write down one or two words, the first things that come to your mind, as you think back on this last year. As you think about last year, what word or words come to your mind? An emotion? An experience? An event? A mood? What is it? For some of you, it will be terrible. It will be death or cancer or a job. For others of you, it will be a baby or maybe a grandchild. As you think about this last year, what word or words come to your mind? Just write that on the front of the Inventory.

I'll share what I wrote with you: *wedding*—my daughter got married. But I also wrote down *60-plus, unequal middle age*. People don't live to be 120. For some reason, I came to that realization this last year, and it was a sobering time. I've been grappling with that. Not bad but just reality.

Now let's open up the Inventory. There are three columns here. **Follow Jesus, Love Others, and Live Missionally**. We would like to ask you to assess your last year. How was your last year? What would you like the new year to be like? What would you like on your bucket list spiritually at the start of 2014? What would you like to see a little progress toward? We are starting with **Follow Jesus**. We spent a lot of time last year saying that following Jesus is the most important thing. Remember we spent the winter talking about the Jesus Creed? Jesus was asked, "What is the most important thing to do? What is the most important Commandment?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this . . . **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **31** The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' [Mark 12:29-31]

Three of you have remembered this. That is wonderful news. So let's go through this idea that loving God starts with **Follow Jesus** and think of some of the ways that plays out in your life. As you read each of the six statements, what we would ask you to do is put a little x on that continuum between *I do it all the time* and *I never do that*, between where you are and where you have been most of this last year. Don't spend a lot of time on this. Feel your way through it.

Now look at those six things and put a plus or a star next to one of them. If you feel like, "I don't do any of these really well but there is one that I do better, there is one that I made progress on," mark that one. Mark the one that you feel better about. "Okay, I feel less guilty about God right there." What is it for you? Now look down at the list again and ask yourself, in your dreams, what would you like to experience more of by this time next year? Would you like to believe more that the Bible can speak to direct your life? Would you like following Jesus to be life-giving

and not just a duty? If there is one that needs more attention, one that you want to grow in more, circle that, would you please?

I know we all go at different speeds. I'm not trying to race you through this. I know that some of you are turning right now to your spouses and saying, "What's our zip code?" as you finish addressing the envelopes.

Now turn to the back panel. For each of these three sections, there is a **Next Steps**. See that? **Next Steps** on the back panel there. Look at what you circled on the inside under **Follow Jesus**. We talk about following Jesus, knowing who God is. What is one thing that would help you? Write that down under **Next Steps**.

Again, our lives are all different. I feel like *I am able to receive God's love and forgiveness*. That was my strength but the one that I struggle with, hard as it may be to believe, is *I participate in regular, meaningful worship*. I feel like I'm the person who pushes the train and so I don't worship. I time my sermons and schedule worship and so my hope for this coming year is that I would like to have more occasions where I worship when I am not preaching. I don't know what it is going to be for you.

Let's go to **Love Others**, the idea that we cannot love God, whom we cannot see, unless we are loving others, who we do see, better, and that God wants to help us love others better. Go down that list. How are you doing at *I demonstrate compassion for hurting people*? Maybe hardest of all are *My faith impacts my family relationships* and *My faith impacts my work and work relationships*.

When you have finished marking the continuums, put a plus next to one statement. What do you feel good about or at least better about? Then as you think about your relationships, circle one of the statements. What is the hardest for you right now? Where do you need the most help, living out or loving out your faith?

I wrote down that one of the strength areas for me that *I am in relationships with people who challenge me with the truth*, people who encourage me. I am blessed that way. But again, as I thought about this last night, while I am on all kinds of boards and we give all kinds of money, demonstrating compassion for the hurting is something that I do more at a distance. So for me, to love others better, I need to get my hands dirty in a real relationship with somebody who is hurting. Is that tutoring? Is that somebody who is obnoxious? Is that somebody whom nobody else sees? I don't know, but on the back panel under **Next Steps**, for **Love Others**, I'm writing down, *Get my hands dirty*.

That's where people usually stop. It's all about loving God and loving others, but let's look together at **Live Missionally**. We believe here that Jesus did not come back to invite you into the club. We believe that the King of Heaven came down to rescue us and fill the Kingdom of Heaven with people who have new lives out there. God wants to send *you* out there in a different kind of way, not to be the evangelist who saves people but to bring light and life and love. How are you doing at that? Read through these six statements and mark the continuums.

Then put a plus next to the *one statement* you feel best about. It may not be any one of these six but take just a second and ask yourself, which of these, that could happen at any stage of your life, do you feel best about? Where do you feel like you have unfulfilled dreams? Last night

I said that I cheat. I am one of the lucky few. I really am blessed. I get to use my gifts to serve others in ways that are easy to see. I put a plus next to No. 1, *I use my God-given gifts to serve others*. But when it came to No. 3 about sharing my faith, I said, yes, it is important to me to share my faith but I'm not sure that I do it. This doesn't count, right? I get paid to do this. It's a captive audience. So on my **Next Steps for Live Missionally**, I wrote down that I plan to serve God in the world by inviting someone here, just having a conversation with somebody at the club or in my neighborhood so that they think that I am as ordinary as anybody usually is and then invite them to join the journey.

I don't know if this has helped you. My prayer is that it would. What we want you to leave with is this though—this is not about New Year's resolutions. New Year's resolutions are just, I've got to be better, work harder, try harder. That's not what growth in faith looks like. Growth in faith is realizing where I am and looking for where God might be and going back to God and saying, "Oh, God, help me. I love You and I sense You love me." That is how God changes lives, not by us trying hard but by us getting closer to the King.

Here's what we'd like you to do. You can, if you would like, take these home with you, that's fine, but I would encourage you (this is a no risk thing at all) to take the small envelope and the Inventory and put them into that big envelope. Can you do that? Don't lick the envelopes. I wouldn't think I'd have to say that. Do not lick the envelopes. Take the small envelope and the Inventory and put them into the big envelope. We have a volunteer group that will make copies of the Inventories and we'll send you back your original right away. Nobody will look at it.

Nobody will look at it unless you would *like* somebody to look at it. Last year about a thousand of you did. About 400 of you said, "I'd love somebody to look at this and pray for me and give me a little advice." All the pastors and all the elders looked at one or two or three of these. Nobody is going to look at it though unless you check the box on the front that says, "I'd like to have my inventory reviewed by a pastor or an elder." Don't worry about it otherwise but if you mark the box, we would love to do that.

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.