

A Profound Blessing

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

I am delighted to report that I have made some progress in keeping the New Year's resolutions I wrote about last week. I have done remarkably well with my first resolution: I have already made mistakes. It's probably the first time I've ever kept a New Year's resolution so easily.

As I was reflecting on this, it occurred to me to revisit a wonderful blessing which undergirds my resolutions. I first heard it when V. Gene Robinson, Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, used it at Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009. The first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, Robinson's consecration in 2003 sparked outrage among more conservative Christians, exposing the growing rift in the worldwide Anglican Communion between conservative and progressive Christians.

I first heard this identified as a Franciscan blessing, meaning that it comes from a Christian order which seeks to follow St. Francis of Assisi in his simplicity and call to the church to be always reforming. Since then I've learned it may have been written by Sister Ruth Marlene Fox, a Benedictine nun in North Dakota.

Whatever its origin, this blessing opens us in a fresh way to living life fully:

"May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart.

"May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

"May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain to joy.

"And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor."

This blessing names the fragility of life profoundly and honestly. Life is a gift. Human life is precious and fragile. We don't own it. We can't control it. Some days, we don't even manage it very well.

This blessing longs powerfully for this gift of life to be better than it is. It strengthens us in our discontent with things as they are. It renews our hope about the possibility that life might be renewed amid pain and wholeness, made whole in the midst of sorrow and joy.

We have all heard that sense of hope in the words of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine as he speaks to his nation and the world about the realities of life during the appalling invasion by Russia. Hope is almost all that the people have left; yet it is enough to spur them to take strong action as they resist the ugliness of Putin's imperialist ambitions.

That kind of discontent and hope is what characterizes New Year's resolutions as well. There is nothing magical about January 1. It is not a different kind of day than December 31. It simply follows that day quite naturally and regularly. But we have decided to count January 1 as a fresh start. We choose to wipe the slate clean and begin with a renewed sense of hopefulness. We face the future with a new resolve.

The nature of hope is that there is a real possibility for change. We seek a better future, and as we work for it, hope is born. We acknowledge that we have the potential to grow and change, so we bless this sense of discomfort. We face forward with a new sense of vision and we make a

new commitment to see beneath the surface of things. We will choose to not be satisfied with easy answers, and we will seek to understand life more deeply.

When we become uncomfortable with the way things are, we also give voice to a natural anger at the injustice and exploitation that we see all around us. We can name that exploitation in so many ways, but the results of it are all around us: homelessness; the increasing and exploitative gap between rich and poor; the ruination of the environment; the growing angry rhetoric employed by political leaders to foster a sense of divisiveness among the citizens; a hardening prejudice against those who are different; and so on.

Therefore, our anger is accompanied by tears. Anger without sorrow leads to arrogance. Sorrow without anger leads to hopelessness. Anger and tears together hold out the possibility that we might work humbly and faithfully to restore life.

I read a wonderful post, a confession, a while ago about a young man preaching his first sermon. With all the wisdom of his 20-some-odd years, he decided that he would preach about hell to warn the people about the consequences of an unfaithful life. In the middle of his sermon, he had an aha moment, an epiphany. A powerful sense of God's compassion overcame him, and he began to weep. Instead of damning the world for the evil he saw all around, he had a vivid sense of the pain that our sorrow causes in the heart of God. He ends, "I could have gone on with this list of what hell is like, this list of torture and horror and pain and say 'This is what God is like.' Or I could go with my breaking heart, I could choose the tears. 'This, this ache of love, this is what God is like.' I chose the tears."

In the midst of our tears, we bless the foolishness of thinking that we might actually be able to make a difference. I believe we can. In the often-quoted phrase attributed wrongly to Gandhi, we can "be the change we want to see."

This, for me, is what it means to live in resolute and strong hope. It is a deep part of faithful Christian living.