

3 January 2009 Sermon by the Rev. Deacon Annie Fritschner

Have a Guilt Free New Year!

*When I was a young girl, every year at this time, my dear Irish Catholic father would gather my older brother and older sister and me around the breakfast table to help us plan our New Year's resolutions. It was a tortuous time for me because mine always ended up being pages of a written confession of my sins and failures - and the resolutions were to **not** do what I had been doing and to be a generally better person. I felt guilty and shameful because frankly the review of the previous year and the proposed intentions were based on my failures and weaknesses. And then usually within a week or two I had broken some or many of the resolutions and the rest would fall like dominoes. All in all an unhappy experience that was based on the best desires of my father, that I (and my brother and sister and he, too) should be the absolute best people we could possibly be—superhuman, I have come to learn.*

*As I got older and left my parents home, I would purposefully **NOT** make resolutions and yet I still felt guilty. This second phase wasn't much more successful because of the guilt that I still had; I still wasn't the best person I could be according to the long weekly letters written by my loving Dad, so it was really just Resolution Hell part 2. I felt guilty not making resolutions, knowing that I would be making resolutions if I were a good person, which clearly I wasn't, but determined not to be ruled by my guilt and weakness and failures, all the time being ruled by them.*

I now am in the third phase of New Year's resolutions which is to say I do not make them and I do not feel guilty. I am liberated from my guilt and shame for two reasons. The first is because God loves me, you - us - just as we are. God loves us in ways beyond our understanding and imagination and certainly beyond any capabilities or skills or talents we bring to the relation. This is God's extravagant gift to us - perpetual love, perpetual pursuit of us, so we can never hide and do not need to waste our time feeling shameful.

The second reason is because Jesus proclaims freedom for captives and release for prisoners; as the Jeremiah passage today states through God we will be liberated from ourselves and shout for joy - we

will dance and be glad and our mourning will be turned into gladness. God in Christ doesn't want our shame and self-loathing and doubt; God wants us to dance and sing as we serve Christ and our neighbors.

God will use our brokenness and weaknesses to create heaven on earth. God calls us and invites us to participate in a world lived in love and respect. If we want to make resolutions and change our minds or our hearts or our behaviors, that is our choice. But those changes are our decision - not God's demand of us; resolutions to change are great but only if they bring us more joyfully closer to God. But if they are strains and punishments and reinforcement of negative self images and false expectations, then they separate from God's unending love for us and are in fact, sinful.

Martha Graham, the dancer and choreographer says it this way: "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost."

If we owe God anything, we are to be the unique selves we are. We are to serve as only each of us uniquely can. We are invited to worship God and celebrate our relationship with the Divine as we are. Each of us is a celebration of the image of God made human, and the Divine spark in each of us is invited to dance in celebration of the sacred love affair we can have - if we want it.

God, through the Holy Spirit, loves us like a parent loves a new born child. Our sweet Jesus is just a couple of tender weeks old, gurgling, trying to focus his eyes on Mary and Joseph, learning his parents voices, provided with everything he needs to grow into a fine youth. And God loves us as though we are that innocent child, sinless, dependent on others for our care, guidance, safety, nourishment, love, wisdom, protection. And it is from this place of faith and innocence and belief that we are called to be God's servers, witnesses, and advocates. And it is this sweet, gentle heavenly kingdom we are called to co-create with the one true benevolent God. The gift of Jesus, the child in our midst, the gift of promise and goodness is the possibility of joyous movement towards God and away from guilt-ridden resolutions

One of our younger St. Philip's members is an example of someone responding to God's invitation to serve others. Catherine Lemel is a 7th grader at Brevard Middle School and she had an experience not long ago when she was shopping in Asheville with her mother. She saw a man by the side of the road. He was holding a sign saying he was hungry and cold and Catherine said, "I wanted to give him everything I had. I knew how blessed I am and I wanted to share everything with him."

Catherine and I have come up with an idea for folks who want to respond to people in need but who don't necessarily want to give cash. Through the grace-filled gift from a parishioner, Catherine and I are making bags of toiletries, and filling them with a \$1 coupon at McDonalds and cards with information about emergency services in Buncombe, Henderson and Transylvania Counties.

These first "Catherine Kits" are available today but if we are going to distribute them widely, we will need more gifts of toiletries and McDonald's coupons.

Catherine says, "What this project is about is giving homeless or other people less fortunate than us some helpful information and some very basic essentials such as soap and a toothbrush to help with good hygiene. I have been blessed by God to have this happen to me and I have been inspired to make the world a safer and healthier place for all one step at a time."

We are all invited to share in the creation and fulfillment of the kingdom, just as we are, just where we are. We are all invited and called whether through our dreams like Joseph, or through other people who inspire us like Catherine, or books, or movies, or prayer and meditation - God will issue invitations for us to accept or decline.

I share with you this prayer is entitled, "A New Beginning" (By Joyce Rupp, Prayers to Sophia)

"Faithful guide, you sit at the gate of my life, inviting me to eagerly enter

the newness stretching before me.

*As I attend old burdens that have weighed me down with worry,
I look ahead with hopeful expectation to what my heart most needs.*

I also recognize the absolute necessity of living in the present moment.

I choose to direct my daily attentiveness toward what will give my life greater balance.

I seek to let go of what keeps me unloving.

I long to contribute to peace in this world.

Often place the mirror of truth before me so that I can see who I am and how I need to go about my life.

Attune me daily to the beauty in all of creation.

Embrace me with your serenity and tender mercy.

I give you my love as I walk into this new beginning.

Once again, I place my confidence in you, faithful companion and trusted guide.

You will show me the way to wholeness.”

God bless you with a 2010 filled with dancing and shouts of joy. Amen.