

Something New (Sermon)
Sermon (FCC)
January 1, 2017

Greetings

Happy New Year! Thank you to Pastor Chuck Blaisdell, and the First Christian Church family, for the opportunity to present this sermon.

Thank you also to my wife Shari, and any family and friends here on this first morning of 2017.

Introduction

As 2016 came to an end I found myself feeling a little nostalgic for some of the old things that I have enjoyed throughout my life. I love music and have always gravitated to Soul Music or R&B as well as Jazz. **A few days ago** while I was reminiscing on the music I listened to growing up in the 70's, I decided to take out the first record album I ever owned.

It is Stevie Wonder's "Songs in the Key of Life". So with a hot chocolate in hand, and the curtains drawn at my home, I took out this album, intending to enjoy its awesome melodies. **Realizing that I needed** to have something to play my Stevie Wonder album on and not wanting to do any damage to the beautiful vinyl, which is undoubtedly a collector's item. I reasoned that it was only best that this jewel should be played on the newest and most advanced piece of equipment available. **I believed I had the perfect music player** for the occasion. You see in November I had upgraded to this brand new iPhone 7 and one of the hooks was that it could play any music, anywhere, at any time. **So for the next half hour** I tried desperately to get my brand new iPhone 7, to play my vintage Stevie Wonder album.

Ok, I'm really not that detached from reality, nor do I live in the "stone-age." **You see** in order to enjoy "Songs in the Key of Life," I would need as this sermon is titled, "**Something New**".

Entering into 2017 it is critical that we examine that which is relevant and primary in our lives. In doing so we must begin to set aside all we find irrelevant and detrimental.

On this New Years morning, I will focus on three areas deemed critically important to our individual and collective health.

Language

The first is language and the way in which we speak to one another both verbally and non-verbally. Unfortunately in 2016, no matter where you stood or with whom you identified most, we bore witness to the peaking of a rhetoric that has further divided individuals and communities. **Truthfully we must** acknowledge that our language has been deteriorating and becoming tainted not only over these past eight years, but for at least the last twenty five.

The maturing of cable television to include its 24-hour news cycle, as well as the internet and the explosion of social media, provides us a window into just how far our language has descended.

Sadly as an example, we were asked to believe through a language lacking compassion and void of facts, that most people of color and African Americans in particular, live in dangerous and deadly neighborhoods. **I don't dispute** the truth of the tragedies of the violence witnessed in Chicago and other cities, because it is very real and to some degree should touch us all. **Language unfortunately** has tended to deliberately ignore the hope found in the lives of people of color living in and outside of those neighborhoods.

Just as damaging is the language labeling a "basket of deplorables," groups who don't view the world through the same lens as those believing themselves as being enlightened. **Yes, I acknowledge** that there are those who speak, believe and act in ways that are deplorably racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic and Islamophobic. **Regrettably when someone** is described as being deplorable, they hear a message of no value being associated with their humanity. **Middle school students** in Michigan chanting "build a wall" in the faces of their Hispanic classmates demonstrates just how far our corrupt language has trickled down.

Proverbs 16:24 eloquently instruct us that: "Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."¹ **In 2017 our language**, which is critically important, must become Something New.

Engagement

A second focus is to consider how we engage a person when in their physical presence. **How many times** have you greeted someone, shaking their hand only to notice that they are not even looking your way, appearing to be uncomfortable or disinterested at best? Perhaps that has been you on occasion. I know that I have periodically fallen into that trap.

Real engagement pulls us away from and out of our traditional comfort zones, and into places where we begin to see others in the fullness of their humanity. **As Gustavo Gutierrez**, a Peruvian theologian, Dominican priest and a principal founder of liberation theology so eloquently states: "**The neighbor**, is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek."

Through his intervention on behalf of a woman that was about to be unjustly stoned for adultery, Jesus provided us with the master example and teaching of what it really means to place ourselves in the path of another person, which is perhaps the most deliberate way in which we can choose to engage one another.²

Something new demands that we no longer look away from the presence of pain embodied in other human beings. **Even today** we can easily choose to invite to dinner the

¹ Proverbs 16:24

² John 8:3-11

person whom we only know from Sunday services, but is currently sitting three pews in front of or behind us. **Engaging that person or family**, you might discover that their fears, concerns and joys are fundamentally no different from yours.

Critical to engagement is that we actively listen to people other than ourselves. **Will you find the time** to not only give financially, but also to physically engage others in activities such as serving food at a local shelter or sitting and eating with families who benefit from the services provided by Family Promise type organizations?

As loving Christians, we in 2017 must understand that there are walls that need to come down in our denomination and congregations. **Engagement beckons** us to want to visit and develop real relationships with congregations that are traditionally African American, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American. **When we** genially engage from the heart, we are able to hear and better understand another's joys and concerns. **In doing so** you afford sister Christian communities an opportunity to learn a bit about you. **You see true engagement** is not passive, but as an active endeavor, it is something new.

Examine beliefs

Again the first two areas that I have revealed for doing something new in 2017, focused on language and engagement. **The third and final area** calls on us to examine our beliefs. **What is it that we believe we know**, why do we believe such to be true, are there alternatives to what we believe which have a value unto themselves, and are our beliefs uplifting others or further adding to their despair? **Before you get too excited**, I am not speaking only in reference to our beliefs as Christians and Disciples of Christ. **I'm speaking of the beliefs** that taints our language, thus preventing us from positively engaging one another.

For instance, argument has been made that the poor and homeless are poor because they either choose to live in poverty or due to some bad choices. **When we are uncritical** and believe these notions to be absolutes, our position tends to be one in which we are dismissive of the underlying truths of what impoverishes many in our community.

Jesus has challenged us to examine beliefs that marginalize the poor. In **His** words! **"Blessed are you who** are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."³ **So for instance, failing school systems** along with limited access to health and social services are all factors that perpetuate seemingly unending cycles of poverty.

The point I am making is that that any one of us could not by choice, find ourselves in the grips of poverty. **Just because someone** does not have the same resources as you or I, does not indicate a choice to live in poverty or to be homeless.

Another is the belief that the immigrant is taking away from and eroding our way of life by crossing the southern borders and living and working amongst us, as "undocumented" persons. **What these beliefs divert us** away from seeing, are the many occasions where

³ Luke 6:20

corporations dealing in agriculture for instance, have bought up large farm lands south of the boarder, used cheap labor to farm those lands, brought corn and grain north of the boarder to be processed, and then transported some of the finished products back south of the boarder to be sold at prices unaffordable to those who had initially labored in the fields.

If we begin to examine and understand this reality, we will see more than just the distorted caricatures of migrants crossing the southern boarder, and instead recognize a people just like you and I, doing the best they can to support their families and themselves.

Lastly, when it comes to examining beliefs, it is time for us to understand that we can only truly live fully, when we live in community with one another.

In examining our beliefs, we are doing something new in that we begin to acknowledge and in part feel the pain of communities, we might not before have understood ourselves to be a part of.

Closing

The scripture in Mark's Gospel where Jesus speaks of not pouring new wine into old wine skins, are some of the most quoted. **Jesus makes the point** that in order **not to ruin** both the wine and wine skins, only new wine can therefore be poured into new wine skins.⁴

On first look you and I might tend to believe that something new cannot be poured into us, since our personal "skins" are not new and have always been with us. **Yet the Apostle Paul** in Romans 6 corrects and encourages us when he asks: "**Don't you know** that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? **We were therefore** buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."⁵ **So there you have it,** these skins that have been with us since birth are made new through our baptism and thus are capable of having something new poured into them.

I am unable to play my vintage Stevie Wonder record on my iPhone 7, but I can pour a new wine or a newer digital version of Stevie Wonder into my new iPhone. **And in the same way** when we pour something new into our skins, we allow ourselves to become positively relevant in the lives of our neighbors.

My prayer is that to be relevant in 2017 and beyond, you will choose to at least occasionally consider "Something New" when it comes to the language you use, how you engage other people, and in examining your short and long held beliefs. **I know I will.**

⁴ Mark 2:18-22

⁵ Romans 6:3-4