

Sermon 7 January 2018
Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

From the wilderness John cries out for the people to come to the river to be baptized to *show they were changing their hearts and lives*. (CEB) I don't know what time of the year it was when John took his stand with God and began to preach repentance, but this sounds suspiciously like a kind of New Year's resolution.

This past week thousands of people began new diets, convinced they could make a real life change this year. Gym and fitness center memberships multiplied and for a week or two weight rooms and exercise classes are filled to capacity. How many people made lists of resolutions to read more, walk more, save more, spend less impulsively, eat better, drink less, pray more?

New Year is the season we have chosen to show the world we are *changing our hearts and lives*. Of course the success rate of our resolutions is historically and chronically low. After worship this morning I will give you a couple articles from the New York Times that include information on making resolutions. My thoughts this morning were largely formed around the first of those articles. Writings like these confirm my conviction that God is speaking to the world all the time in countless ways.

This is what research tells us about how *unsuccessful* we are making resolutions—how unsuccessful we are *changing our hearts and lives*. According to the Times, by *Jan. 8, some 25 percent of resolutions have fallen by the wayside. And by the time the year ends, fewer than 10 percent have been fully kept.*

The article was written by David DeSteno and he begins by highlighting what we have all been led to believe about the virtue that brings success—*willpower*. DeSteno confirms that people with strong willpower *do* achieve—with strong willpower and self-control we can accomplish remarkable things, but he continues,

exerting willpower can take a psychological and physical toll. As recent work by the Northwestern University psychologist Greg Miller has shown, willing oneself to be "gritty"

*can be quite stressful.
Studying about 300 teenagers from socially and economically
disadvantaged backgrounds,
Professor Miller found that those who were better at
using self-control did have more success
when it came to resisting temptations,
but at a cost to their health.
Their bodies suffered not only from increased stress responses, but also
from premature aging of their immune cells.*

I won't take the time to summarize all of the insightful information I found in the article, but I hope you will take time to read it in its entirety. It is worth your time.

What struck me most powerfully is what the article identifies as the healthy alternative to sheer willpower. If 90% of us fail to change our hearts and our lives through per grit, is there a better way? According to DeSteno the answer is yes—and that alternative is right in front of us almost every Sunday morning. DeSteno says the most powerful engine to sustained self-control is not willpower. He contends our view of self-control is wrong.

In choosing to rely on rational analysis and willpower to stick to our goals, we're disadvantaging ourselves. We're using tools that aren't only weak; they're also potentially harmful.

What is the alternative to gutting it up to change? DeSteno writes:
*That tool is our **social emotions**. These are the emotions — things like gratitude and compassion — that support the positive aspects of social life.*

*For years I've been studying the effects of these emotions on decision-making and behavior, and I've found that unlike reason and willpower, they naturally incline us to be patient and persevere.
When you are experiencing these emotions, self-control is no longer a battle, for they work not by squashing our desires for pleasure in the moment but by increasing how much we value the future.*

That is what we believe isn't it? We believe we find peace and harmony in living with Jesus, following the Jesus Way—living beyond our own appetites—living with a wholesome concern for others. We take our cue from Jesus, and the Holy Spirit gives us the vision we need to be fully alive with God. We respond with compassion because we have received compassion. We deny ourselves a temporary pleasure because we have hope for the future—and because we are willing to live for greater, more durable, *eternal* values. We make time to reach out to the lonely because we have friends who care about us, and because we know God is with us.

We are thankful and we live in an ever-expanding world defined by love and compassion. We love because God first loved us. We learn that *self-control isn't about being miserable*. (DeSteno) It is about being in love with life, rafting on the rampant flood of God's love through the tributaries of Existence.

The more we do it, the more we realize the power, pleasure and satisfaction we experience in harmony with God's Spirit, the more thankful we are, and the more we are willing to sacrifice and experience the deep pleasures of the communion of grace in the community of all creation. We become more keenly moral and more fully alive in the company of Christ.

Let me offer one more excerpt from the Times article.

What underlies these moral traits is the ability to put something else ahead of your own immediate desires and interests — to exercise self-control.

Working hard to keep up your end of a deal or helping another person by giving time, money, food or a shoulder to cry on all require a willingness to sacrifice some resources in the moment.

In exchange, you reap the benefits of those strong relationships down the line.

When it comes to making such short-term sacrifices, most of us don't rely on a cold, rational analysis of costs and benefits.

*We don't normally calculate what's to be gained by helping someone else.
We just feel like we should.
It's our emotions — specifically, gratitude, compassion and
an authentic sense of pride (not hubris) —
that push us to behave in ways that show self-control.*

Is it too far a reach to suggest this is a large part of why we come together to worship, to be together, and to work together? Are we here because we know we are incomprehensibly blessed every moment of our lives? Do we come here to thank God and to ask God for more of this beautiful life? Can it be true that our hope for change is not tied to our willpower but to God's love and grace, and the incessant work of the Holy Spirit? Can it be true that our hope to change our hearts and lives is *not* grounded *in willpower* but in the *awareness* of how wonderful and meaningful our lives are—every moment?

Is this what we expect when we come to Holy Communion? Do we come to the table for God to feed our souls, to change our hearts and lives, to give us a vision and a passion for a world where *gratitude, compassion and an authentic sense of pride* are the marks of who we are, how we live, and the world we help create? Happy *New Year*—happy *new heart*—happy *new life*—ever and forever *new* in the love of God!