

A beautiful way to start the year!

Message for Sunday, January 4, 2015
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 6:12; Philippians 4:12-13;
John 15:4-6

Children's Message: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

I have a gift for each of you. But don't thank me for it; it's not from me — I'm just delivering it to you. Give each child a cheque, with the amount written in as "Eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty hours." Sign each one from "God."

That's how many hours there are in this year. 8,760 hours. That's a lot of time! Bring out a pile of paper to represent the time!!

God has given that time to you. Now it's up to you to choose how to use that time.

If you waste it, you don't get any extra. It's gone.

But the Bible reading today tells us that doesn't mean we should spend all our time working, and never take time to play or relax. It is good to take time for all these things.

Ask for ideas on something they would like to do with their time during the coming year.

Prayer of Confession

From the time that I come to church, I am carrying a large, heavy sack on my back. Keep it there, visible, through the service up to this point. It represents the burden of my grudges, which I have not yet forgiven.

Lord Jesus, our feelings are sensitive like a hummingbird's wing:

we take offense at petty things;
we imagine the worst instead of the best;
and we nurse our hurts, peeling off the scab to look at the wound over and over.

Yet our hearts are hardened like cold steel:

we shut out any thoughts of our own wrong-doing;
we can justify anything we do, while condemning others for doing exactly the same thing.
we expect others to forgive and forget, while our steel trap waits to catch someone in their weakness.

Lord Jesus, you showed us a new way to live, and you promised to give us a new heart. Forgive us and heal us, we pray, as we forgive those who hurt us. Amen.

Let the sack fall to the ground, loudly. Express the relief and joy of having that burden taken away from me.

Message: "A beautiful way to start the year!"

1) The danger of the toxic waste *inside* you

Fifty years ago, mining companies, oil companies, chemical companies – industries which produce lots of toxic waste – thought they could just bury toxic waste and that took care of the problem. We have since learned it doesn't work that way. Those poisons make trouble. The waste seeps into the environment, poisoning everything around it.

Buried anger and bitterness does the same thing in our lives. It eats away at relationships, destroying friendships, families, even churches. I wonder how much illness is caused by people holding bitterness inside them.

At the church in Fletcher, where I served before coming here, a family member of one of the congregation was part of the Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan. His name was Brad. When his unit finished their six month assignment, they came back to Canada. But Brad didn't come home with them.

Brad came home two weeks before the others, after taking the blast of a roadside bomb. His specialty was finding and disarming these bombs. In fact, he had just finished work on one bomb when a child came up to him and said, "There's another one over here." Brad went over to get the robot they use to test a suspected bomb site. But as he was doing that, the bomb was detonated by remote control. The whole thing was a setup.

It was a massive bomb, and even from a distance Brad took a major hit. He lost his left arm, and had severe injuries to his right arm. He had burns to his face and neck. Shrapnel went right through his chest, puncturing his lung on the way before being embedded in his back. [Remember: this is even while he was wearing protective gear!]

Brad says, though, that he harbours no ill feelings towards the people of Afghanistan. "Muslims are not a bad people. They are good people, aside from the few crazies."

Let me ask you this: How will Brad's attitude affect his healing, both physical and emotional?

What if instead he said, "I hate those Taliban. I will never forget, and never forgive the people who did this to me. For the rest of my life, I'm going to watch and hope I meet one. When I do, I'll beat him to a pulp." How would that attitude affect his healing?

What do you think it would be like to be the girlfriend of someone who is filled with hate? How would that affect

their relationship? Even though she had nothing at all to do with the attack on him, their relationship would become another victim.

Not forgiving others hurts you just as much as the other person. Nelson Mandela, when he was released from prison in South Africa, determined that he would not hold a grudge against the people who had persecuted him; if he did, he would still be in prison.

Jesus tells us to pray like this:

Matthew 6:12, New International Version:
“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”

Some people say that’s too hard. Do you see how much harder it is to hold on to that bitterness? How much better to let it go, and be free!

Just think: wouldn’t it be great to start 2015 by wiping the slate clean? What a great way to start a new year! If you’ve got toxic waste stored up in the closet of your mind, now is the time to clear it out.

2) OK, but *how do I do that?*

You might be thinking right now, “OK, I can see this is right. This is something I need to do. At least that’s what my head says. My gut says, ‘No way. Not going to happen.’ ”

I agree. What Jesus is asking—no, what Jesus is *commanding* us to do is difficult.

Let’s remember one thing: Jesus never asks us to do something he’s not willing to do himself. As Jesus was being nailed to the cross, undergoing excruciating pain, he prayed:

Luke 23:34, New International Version:
“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Here’s a testimony from Paul about how he handles difficult things.

Philippians 4:12–13, Good News Bible:
I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.

The key to letting go of bitterness is to do it through the power of Jesus working in you. You could pray something like this:

“Lord Jesus, I just can’t forgive that person who hurt me. I can’t, but you can. Please forgive him or her through me. Jesus, I can’t love my enemy, but you can. Please love him or her through me. Jesus, I can’t pray for—well, maybe I could. That’s a good place to start. I’ll start with that.”

And that’s how you do it. Ask Jesus to work in you and through you. And then put that faith into practice: start praying for that person. Allow Jesus to lead you in that prayer; just follow wherever he leads you.

Acting out our Prayer of Confession

Ask the congregation to stand in a large circle, hands joined together. Read:

John 15:4-6, New Revised Standard Version:
Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Ask people to imagine themselves as the living branches of God’s vine.

Now ask them to stretch the circle as wide as possible, so they are just barely holding on to the next person.

Ask worshippers to think of a particular sin which pulls them away from God’s vine. (Tell a few people ahead of time to keep on pulling even past this limit, so that the circle breaks.) This is what sin does: it breaks people apart from each other, and from God.

Ask people to imagine that they were broken off and separated from everyone. They were cut off from friends, family, church, school, work, neighbours. Remind them of others who are already isolated: the hungry, the homeless, those in prison, the sick, those trapped in drug abuse.

How does it feel to be separated? *Wait for answers.* Sin is lonely.

Ask people to move closer and closer together until they can get no closer. Encourage them to hug one another, while rereading John 15:4-5.