

Sermon “Bad Habits”
Sunday January 12, 2025
Kirk of St James
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Every January I sit down and try to set some New Year’s goals for myself. Often, they have to do with changing an aspect of my life or identity that I either don’t like or want to improve. To be healthier, more active, or something other than I currently am--and every year I fail. So, this year I did some digging around habit formation and came across an article titled “How Long Does It Actually Take to Form a Habit” by Jocelyn Solis-Moreira. In it she debunks a common myth that says it takes twenty-one days to change a habit. In her article she includes the quote, “One popular idea suggests that it takes 21 days to solidify a habit. A three-week time frame might sound easily reachable to someone making a resolution on New Year’s Day, when people tend to feel extra motivated to start a new habit or kick an old one, says Colin Camerer, a behavioral economist at the California Institute of Technology who has conducted research on habit formation. Yet every January 21 very few people can boast that they have kept their resolutions. One survey showed that only 9 percent of people actually stuck to their goals in 2023.”

So why are we so keen on change, yet struggle to follow through? There are several factors like how complex a goal is, how big a change we are making, or even how ingrained a practice is in our life. The study demonstrated that a more realistic timeframe is sixty-six days. I had a friend who smoked for years, and she decided to quit. Not only was it a huge change for her but there was a ripple effect. It wasn’t just the nicotine but also the ritual. She never knew what to do with her hands without something in them. Some of her friendships and identity were built around who she spent time with on a smoke break. It was a far more complex change than simply not smoking, and the reality was smoking had become a part of her identity.

Sometimes our habits become a key point in our identity, and when things change either by choice like a New Year's resolution or are forced by circumstance change can be difficult.

For example, what about parents who suddenly find themselves empty nesters? They find themselves walking down to the empty bedroom wondering what life will look like next. Habits like running kids around to activities, keeping the household on track, and making sure the fridge is full drops off to increased free time, and lack of desire to cook meals. How about walking into a brand-new workplace and looking around and wondering how things will go. What new habits might you form in a new place? Or, what about someone walking out of their office for the final time, having finally retired. While some may be doing cartwheels out the door, we may also find ourselves wondering what life will look like next."

Habits are simply part of being human, and the ways we move through the world, they are a part of identity for better or worse. We are finite beings in an infinite universe, so it is not surprising that we look to find our place in it. As one writer said, "Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy? These questions, which come to the forefront in adolescence and young adulthood, never really go away. Whether we ask them explicitly or only subconsciously, we often look for the answers in the wrong places: in our roles, our work, our peer groups, or our accomplishments and acquisitions. Ultimately, none of these can deliver what we need. What we need, according to the prophet Isaiah, is to hear how God gives us identity and value."

It is sometimes difficult for us to understand our worth apart from the things we do, we have, or we are. We tend to be defined by things that are external to us, the things that make us feel like our lives have meaning. For example, when we meet new people, our conversations tend to hover around topics like what we do, our families, and even hobbies and pastimes. Sometimes it is easier for us to focus on things external to us, the problem is it is not a true

barometer of our worth. Another part of our identity as a Christian that I often wonder about is how we view ourselves and our faith in light of things that are “bad habits” in our lives. For example, we look at the most broken parts of ourselves, and we think that we have no worth or value in God’s eyes until we get everything lined up perfectly. Over the years I have met people who feel like they cannot come to church until they have themselves “sorted” out, when the reality is the church is exactly the place we should come when we are working through our brokenness.

That is certainly not the message offered in Isaiah today. In Isaiah 42 God is angry at the Israelites, and he expresses his divine judgement and disappointment. The Israelites are carried into exile because of their poor decisions, and practices. Because of their actions they had been removed from their homeland and suffered for their arrogance and disobedience. The prophet Isaiah had pronounced judgment on them--they have reaped what they have sown. While that may be the true, God assures them their value runs far deeper than this. In fact, in words written almost as a love letter God affirms "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Those words are easy to read but infinitely more difficult to live and understand on a personal level. We live in a world where it is easy to feel insignificant or unloved. We live in a world where modernity's fears are never far from us. Especially since we live in a global context where we can hear the cries of so many people yet feel limited in our ability to help. However, God's words here cut across the generations and the centuries to remind us that we are known and loved.

How might your life change if you could believe these phrases fully in your own life "you are redeemed, you are loved, you are mine." I don't mean that on a head level but, if every fiber of your being truly knew and lived with that understanding. It would be incredible, wouldn't it? It is so easy for doubt and fear to slip into our lives. And as the Israelites

demonstrated to also let it slip into our community. Congregations sometimes feel this way when they compare size, budgets, outreach work and countless other things with the churches around them but, God keeps telling us how much he loves us and none of the other stuff matters. Our job is to keep living into the reality of God's love and letting it guide us both individually and as a community.

It is no accident that this passage is paired with the one from Luke when Jesus is baptized. In this account we hear that Jesus got in line with all of humanity and was baptized. He stood alongside countless other people as they sought what John's baptism offered them. "...in the waters of baptism, we understand that God marks us and claims us as God's children." In the waters of baptism, we meet the grace, mercy and love of God face to face. We are known, we are called by name. It is also the beginning of the journey, where we seek to know and internalize the love of God throughout our lives. That is an incredible gift.

I know how hard it is to believe that we are truly and deeply loved beyond measure. I often find myself caught in this cycle where I feel like I can change myself, if I can form the right habits, if I can make all the right decisions then I am worthy. That if I pray more, read my bible more, and have more faith I would be more worthy. While those are things I may be trying and quite honestly failing at from time to time, God says that's okay. "God does not love us only when we are perfect. God loves us through the process. God says we are precious in God's sight, despite our sins and imperfections. Therefore, when we fail and fall, as we inevitably will as both individuals and congregations, we can take comfort in the realization that our failures do not prompt God to quit loving us or laying claim to us." Maybe one of the most important things we can do in both resolutions and in life is allow ourselves grace as we continue to grow. It is not a bad thing to want to grow or change, but we are not marked by our failures, we are marked by God's love.