

The Pastor's Notebook

We are just a few days into 2018 and I have already come across words which just might transform and bless the new year in a mighty way. They were penned by Thomas Merton, the great Roman Catholic writer and theologian and carry quite a lesson for the coming 12 months. Listen:

“To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything He has given us - and He has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of His love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from Him.

Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference.”



As I say farewell to 2017 I do so with abundant gratitude for the many ways I have been blessed over the past year, including:

- The privilege of serving a congregation of compassionate, generous, and friendly people;
- To have been inspired by the many wonders of the Christmas season including the cantata, the children's play, the caroling, advent gatherings, and the beautiful Christmas Eve services;
- To have baptized a number of children and adults and officiated at many weddings in our church and in exotic places like the Pittsburgh Botanic Gardens;
- To have been humbled by the honor of committing to God's eternal care some of the very finest people, including Linda's mother;
- To work with a staff of women and men of great integrity and faith as we seek to nurture others' awareness of God's love;
- To have the best and most faithful of friends;
- And, of course, to have a wife as kind and wonderful as Linda, daughters who instill such joy and pride, a son-in-law who cares deeply for his family, and a little granddaughter whom I cherish.

- At the very center of my heart is gratitude to God, who rescued me from an empty life and pain and given me a rock-solid foundation of love and a purpose that I try to fulfill every day.

And these are only A FEW of my many blessings which, when listed, bring me to my knees in humble thanks. Gratitude does indeed make a difference.

As you enter 2018, what are you grateful for? What has entered your life, blessed you, inspired or taught you something significant? Gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift. It liberates us from what John Ortberg calls “the prison of self-preoccupation.

Dear friends, on this cold winter’s night I am very grateful for YOU! May 2018 bring you great joy and countless blessings, including the awareness that God loves us all, and needs us to bring hope and peace to our world – together!

A Penguin Parable

During storms, emperor penguins huddle for warmth, taking turns at the center and on the perimeter of the group. While incubating eggs, up to 6,000 male penguins have been observed clustering for shelter against the harsh Antarctic winter. Partially grown chicks gather in protective “crèches” (French for “cribs”); often surrounded by a colony of adults, these groupings ward off predators and cold.



In stormy times, humans also need supportive groups; we can’t survive alone. A church family allows us to take turns giving and receiving care. Amid social upheaval, injustice, illness, natural disaster and any loss or crisis, God invites us to gather for protection and warmth. In the church community, we support and strengthen one another and are empowered to go out again into the less-sheltered world.

Something learned

According to an unknown 65-year-old: "I've learned that if you pursue happiness, it will elude you. But if you focus on your family, the needs of others, your world, meeting new people, and doing the very best you can, happiness will find you."

The Story Behind Epiphany

Epiphany is the Christian festival celebrated each year on January 6. Along with Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, it is one of the oldest Christian holy days.

The festival was first celebrated in the Eastern Church (Orthodox) and was adopted in the Western church by the fourth century. Epiphany commemorates the first “showing forth” or manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, particularly the Magi or Wise Men. The Epiphany story is meant to explain that Christ was not just for the Jews, but for non-Jews (Gentiles) as well, anywhere in the world.



The eve of Epiphany is called Twelfth Night and relates to the arrival of the Wise Men from the East at the birthplace of the Lord in Bethlehem.

Helen Keller said, “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight and no vision.” As we enter 2018, what are you focused upon? This is an important question because what we target is what we become.

Unity in Diversity

Although early Christians had much in common, they also dwelt in diversity. Each of their leaders emphasized certain parts of the gospel and favored certain worship styles. They all believed in the resurrected Jesus, and they all celebrated the Lord's Supper and baptism. But Christians in Corinth had a unique approach, as did those in Ephesus, Philippi, Galatia, Rome and so on.

It might be boring if we all believed and practiced completely alike. Variations don't need to be an impediment to Christian unity. As pastor Charles Best said, “If we're going to be in heaven together, we might as well get along now.”

Library News – ‘Keep the Faith’

The American Spirit by celebrated U.S. historian *David McCullough* was recently donated to our Library. This 2017 book, the latest of many best-sellers by McCullough, who was born and raised in Pittsburgh, is a collection of his speeches over the years. Many were at universities, including a commencement address at *Pitt*.

The subtitle of the 192-page volume is **Who We Are and What We Stand For**.

The book has been highly praised by reviewers. Many have said its message is particularly important now because this is such a divisive and uncertain time in America – and the world. They use phrases such as “dark and divided” and “especially bleak” to describe this period in history. But they say McCullough’s words are inspirational and optimistic, and that he urges us to “keep the faith.”

The publisher, *Simon & Schuster*, said, “*The American Spirit* reminds us of core American values to which we all subscribe, regardless of which region we live in, which political party we identify with, or our ethnic background. This is a book ... that reminds us who we are and helps to guide us as we find our way forward.”

McCullough, 84, who grew up in Pittsburgh’s *Point Breeze* neighborhood, is perhaps America’s most honored historian. He won the *Pulitzer Prize* twice, for ***John Adams*** and ***Truman***. His many other works include ***The Course of Human Events*** and ***The Johnstown Flood***.

- Your Library Staff

Let our New Year’s resolution be this: We will be there for one another as fellow members of humanity, in the finest sense of the word.

Returning to Christmas

When January comes along, we can continue that sense of comfort and warmth that comes at Christmas by returning to the Christmas story, which gives us two great promises: God understands you, and God can redeem you.



I encourage people to make it a point to re-read the Christmas story every month, and allow Christmas to be Christmas every month. We need to keep coming back to it.

- Max Lucado

The Promise of Spring in Winter

Like winter, some seasons of our faith journey feel cold, barren, devoid of life. Will renewal ever come? Will spring flourish again in our heart? Yet the world bears witness to God's power to bring new life where all seems lost.

In the early 1990s, the St. Louis neighborhood of South City deteriorated sharply due to a stagnant economy, population decline and crime. Then Bosnian refugees started settling there. Thousands of people renovated abandoned houses and other buildings; they started businesses and brought skilled labor back to the neighborhood. As the area

returned to life, the refugees experienced renewal, too — hope in place of discouragement, opportunities where none had existed, peace instead of war, life replacing death.



When our faith is challenged by despair, lost dreams or an uncertain future — when God's promises feel as dead as winter — real-life renewal stories are signs of spring. They testify to the resurrection God has in store for us.

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They are not our sheep, and it is not our tent

by Gloria Stephan

SERVICE PROJECT * **John 21:15** is where Jesus asks Simon Peter not once, but three times, “Do you love me?” Simon Peter replies each time with “Yes, you know that I love you” and Jesus then instructs him to “Feed my lambs”, “Take care of my sheep” and “Feed my sheep”.

I have written before about how these words can be heard as clear instructions for us to feed and care for each other. Feeding and caring for others through food ministries like Daily Bread or SHIM, and home repair ministries like ASP, or larger endeavors like the Nyadire Connection are obvious ways to do so. Surely, those are the folks Jesus was talking about, right?

A recent conversation about inviting certain folks to a church activity reminded me that we often miss the point of who those lambs and sheep belong to. We think it’s up to us if they are to be ‘included’. Note that Jesus says ‘my’ lambs, and ‘my’ sheep. They belong to him not us. They are not our sheep.

In the book *Pastrix* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, there’s a story where the author realizes that faith and grace are not about inclusion or who is welcome and who is not. She’s a very unconventional pastor to say the least, but she admits to thinking it was her job to either “change people so they fit in the limited space under the tent, or to extend the roof so that they fit.” Then, she realizes “Either way, it’s misguided because it’s not my tent. It’s God’s tent.”

Wow, that sure changes the perspective, doesn’t it?

Our gracious and merciful God loves all. Jesus welcomes the outcasts, eats with the sinners, cares for the poor, and heals the

sick. He then tells us to welcome the stranger, love our enemies and help our neighbors because we all belong to Him.

It's not up to us. They are not our sheep. It is not our tent. All are worthy.

Our ASP trip is scheduled for Sunday, June 17 – Saturday, June 23. Registrations are due by February 4. Forms are available in the church narthex and on the church website. For more information, contact me at gstephan57@gmail.com or see the ASP website at www.ASPHome.org.

The Freedom of Forgiveness

Martin Luther King Jr. called forgiveness “a permanent attitude,” as opposed to “an occasional act.” Maintaining a forgiveness mindset leads to peace and freedom.

Author and pastor Max Anders experienced that freedom in seminary. After cheating on a Hebrew final, he was distraught and confessed his sin to God and the professor. “I felt deeply cleaned. Pure. Holy,” Anders writes in *21 Unbreakable Laws of Life*. “I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. I wanted to run and jump and dance. The burden was lifted. ... I was free!”



By contrast, he writes, “If we don’t ask for forgiveness when we wrong someone, we lose our moral authority; the debris of sin begins to accumulate in our hearts, choking our conscience Others know when we sin against them, and if we don’t make it right, it hurts our reputation as well as God’

“In darkness there is no choice. It is light that enables us to see the differences between things; and it is Christ who gives us light.”

- Augustus Hare

Save the dates for ASP Bistros!

Delicious dinners will be available **SUNDAYS in Lent from 4:30-6:30PM** as fundraisers for our Appalachia Service Project summer mission trip. *(Please note the change of day and times for the Bistros).*



All the food and preparation time is donated by our church's ASP supporters; otherwise it doesn't work. Our diners receive a homemade meal lovingly prepared and served during this time of fellowship.

Patrons are encouraged to give generously as they are able, keeping in mind what a similar meal might cost at a restaurant - but there's no comparison. Plan to join us on five Sundays - **February 18, 25, March 4, 11 and 18** and support our ASP mission team.

Coffee, Tea, & Music Are Back!

Our Coffeehouse Worship Service, featuring some of the area's most talented singers and instrumentalists will return to First Bethel Church on **February 3 at 6 p.m.** in Founders Hall!



Enjoy this casual gathering folks who are interested in something different - a unique worship experience. Would you like to help provide beverages and snacks? See Pastor Tom today! Bring a friend! The Coffeehouse will meet on the first Saturday of every month!

I believe that appreciation is a holy thing — that when we look for what's best in a person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does all the time. So in loving and appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something sacred.

- Fred Rogers

Renewal of the Spirit

Recently, I encountered a woman who has everything she'll ever need – she's definitely living the good life, except for one thing. She said there's an emptiness inside, a hollowness that is, for her, unbearable. I asked about her spiritual life and how she replenishes the God-given vitality that the day-to-day world drains from her. She just looked at me and, in somber tones, said she hadn't done much about it at all. She had overlooked the need to refill her reservoir of hopefulness.

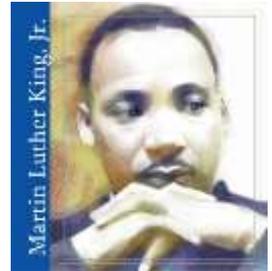


Our monthly Taize Prayer Service is a most unique way to experience the refreshing waters of God's love. In our sanctuary opportunities for renewal and reflection will be available on **Wednesday January 17 at 7:30 pm.** Join us and discover a power and love that restores the heart and soul!

There's Something About Love

“Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, ‘*Love your enemies.*’ It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long.

Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load.



That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies.”

– Martin Luther King Jr.

From the Outreach Committee

I hope the snow has put the final touches on the spirit of Christmas for you as it has done for me. The beauty of the pure white snow covering the brown earth and stillness of a blanket of snow brings me peace.

The Outreach committee would like to thank the the folks at First Bethel for their generosity of fulling the angel requests from the Angel tree. You have helped to make another person's Christmas a little brighter.



We have a few great programs, some new ones and some old ones that will be coming up soon that you will be able to participate in. We encourage you to be a part of the Outreach program here at First Bethel.

The dates for for Daily Bread are as follows: Jan 7, March 4, June 24, August 5, and Nov.11. Please keep these dates in mind and if you would like to help in any way please call the Church office at 412-835-0700 or Sally Irick at 412-833-9324. We are always looking for new volunteers.

On January 28 between the services we will be making tie blankets to be taken down to Daily Bread and given to persons of need. No experience necessary as we can teach you all you need to know. Watch the bulletin for the location of where we well be doing this activity.

On February 4 we will again be hosting a Souper Bowl collection. We had a great response last week year and we would like to try and collect more this year. There is such a need here in the South Hills area. All the soup that is collected will be taken to SHIM for distribution.

- Sally Irick