

A New Body...Forever!

Disclaimer: Material for this message was adapted in part from sermons found on the Sermon Central website.

Happy New Year! It's that time again; time to set lofty goals for yourself. Time to aim high in 2023. Time to dream that you might be one of only 9-12% of Americans who actually fulfill your new year's resolution! Year after year, we continue do this to ourselves ... no matter how many times we fall into the 88% or greater category of those failing to do so.

Actually, New Year's resolutions are nothing new, we humans have been failing at self-imposed expectations since ancient history. In mid-March, when they celebrated the spring barley harvest, Babylonians would make promises to their gods; promises to return borrowed items or tools, or to pay their debts.

And like us (or actually, more us like them), Roman citizens started the new year off by making vows to their god Janus—hence the name January.

Medieval knights had their own version of the New Year's resolution, called "the peacock vow." Each year, during the last feast of the Christmas week, one at a time, every knight would place his hand on a live or roasted peacock and recommit himself to the ideals of chivalry, honor, and dedication to duty.

In the 1700s, Catholic and Protestant denominations began "watch night services" that met from late night, December 31st, into the wee hours of January 1st. At this gathering, the people would review the year that has passed, make confession, and then prepare for the year ahead by praying for resolutions they had made.

Here in the U.S., 38.5% of adults follow the New Year's tradition of making resolutions. 23% quit in the first week and only 36% make it past the first month. There's just something about the human experience that every occasion for a fresh start, stirs up a determination within us to change, to improve, to begin something new.

Now, if you do a Google Search on "*Top Ten New Year's Resolutions*," most often you find body-related goals: to lose weight, exercise more, eat better. It's no wonder at this time of year that you see so many commercials for Weight Watchers and fitness centers parking lots filled with cars (*for at least a couple of months*). We want change! We want to better ourselves! So what better place to start than with the thing people see most? It's obvious. The first place to start is with our body.

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons even published an article titled, "*Plastic Surgery and New Year's Resolutions*." The author, a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon (surprise, surprise), noted that often, at the top of people's lists of resolutions are body-related goals and that, at the beginning of the year, many people consider plastic surgery as a path toward achieving these goals, both for their appearance and self-esteem. The article went on to suggest, "the popularity of social media and the rise of the 'selfie' have made individuals more conscious about how they look. No longer is plastic surgery something that one considers as they age. It is not uncommon for people in their 20s to have plastic

surgery to improve their image, which can subsequently influence their professional lives through social media.” (<https://www.plasticsurgery.org/news/blog/plastic-surgery-and-new-years-resolutions>)

In other words, we make these body-related resolutions: we seek change for ourselves, not just for our own self-esteem, but also for the approval of others.

We stand in front of the mirror, and we pick apart every little detail we don't like about the image looking back at us. We compare ourselves to others around us or those we see on TV. We convince ourselves that life could be better if I could change THIS about how I look. It doesn't help when we hear people telling fat jokes or making comments about others' weight issues;

we fear being the object of such jokes when we are out of hearing. On the flip side, we also hear talk about a person being all skin and bones. So, clearly there's a happy medium on the weight spectrum somewhere between fat jokes and anorexic fears; and you imagine that you could maybe get there someday, in that happy medium.

But to think that way is foolish, because the scales of time, so to speak, are not tilted in your favor. That mirror will still be waiting for you, ready to show your flaws. And, unfortunately, we unwittingly pass these image issues onto our children, who then struggle with their own distorted body image issues; so the cycle continues.

Happy New Year.

Don't get me wrong — if you've made a New Year's resolution, I will support you in whatever way I can. If you are seeking to make healthy choices in diet and exercise, I applaud you and admire you, and I hope you are successful. And if you go the route of plastic surgery, for whatever reason, that's fine — I claim no expertise on the theological implications of cosmetic procedures. Today, all I am trying to do is make more than abundantly clear that our culture is obsessively focused on body image. And that affects us all in one way or another. To varying degrees, we all become obsessed with our bodies.

So, you want a new body for 2023? Let me tell you about a new body that is already yours.

For starters, no matter what your resolutions for the new year are; no matter how you feel about yourself and your body. When you go home and look in that mirror, you are looking at someone who is already loved.

- You are looking at someone who is already accepted.
- You are looking at someone made in the image of God.
- You are looking at someone for whom Christ died — someone so valued that He gave up His life, offering His body to be broken in exchange for yours.
- You are looking at someone who — no matter the age, no matter the weight, no matter what physical features frustrate you ... you are looking at someone who, on the last day, will receive a new, immortal, imperishable body by grace, through faith in Jesus.

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ,”

The Apostle Paul - Galatians 3:27

Of course, Paul wasn't writing to the Galatians about physical appearances, nor about how we view ourselves in the mirror. But he very well could have, because in today's text, Paul was referring to a different kind of mirror — one that follows us around. It's the mirror of the Law, that ever present, stern schoolmaster, always there to show us our failures; showing our sins and every little mistake; showing our need for a Savior.

So every time we look into that self-critical mirror, seeing only our guilt, our shortcomings, and we pause to reflect on our sins; in those moments, we should also remember God's Word of forgiveness having already set us free.

- When we look in the mirror of the Law and see an unrighteous sinner, God sees His perfect and holy Son.
- When we see dirty, despicable deeds, God sees the cleansing works of Jesus.
- When we see even our best efforts aren't good enough, God sees Him who on the cross proclaimed, "It is finished."
- When we stand at the mirror of the Law, looking in disgust, it's as if God Himself is standing beside us looking at that mirror of judgment, and He says, "No, I don't see it! All I see is my child."

This new, sinless body is yours! May you wear it with joy in this new year! *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ."*

But, as just about every other commercial these days says, *wait, there's even more!* Because, this idea of our new body in Christ goes beyond our own personal spiritual image in the mirror, there's another new body Paul is also writing about: **the body of Christ**. While, he doesn't use that phrase here in Galatians, he does so elsewhere; and that's ultimately what he's getting at.

You see, in Paul's day, there was a status division in the Church—mainly between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile, or "Greek," Christians; between wealthy Christians and enslaved Christians, and – as it had been since time immemorial – between men and women. But Paul counters all of these divisions, saying that for all the baptized;

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for **you are all one in Christ Jesus.**"

So, there is no group of believers distinct, no group better than another, no group more or less needy than another. In this "Body of Christ," Jesus has leveled the playing field. With God, every Jewish man's sin is equal to every Greek woman's sin. And every enslaved Gentile Christian is just as freely forgiven, just as accepted, as any wealthy Jewish Christian.

The Body of Christ is one. And, by your baptism, you have become part of this same new body. But for some reason — as much as our culture emphasizes body issues, and as often as we wrestle with body image — for some reason, we struggle with this concept.

"The Body of Christ." We like the sound of it. It's quaint. It's a nice way to think about our church family ... but to actually LIVE that way? Well that's something completely different. I

wonder, if we put up a mirror to ourselves as the Body of Christ in this place, would we be happy with what we saw?

Would we settle for the image reflecting back at us?

Would we be pleased that roughly half of our body doesn't show up regularly for worship?

Would we be happy with the solitude we've confined our Christian faith to?

The problem is that as Americans, we love our independence so much that we have allowed our Christian lives to become independent; disconnected from one another. When you joined this congregation, you committed to being part of this community; the Body of Christ in this place. And commitment doesn't mean one hour a week. Commitment is joining in life together, in all the joys and the sorrows and everything in between.

We have people struggling in this congregation—and too often, they do it alone. We have people struggling, silently. You might be struggling, silently. Whether it's loneliness, alcoholism, finances, gambling, or grief; not having been able to have kids, or needing a date night with your spouse away FROM your kids; or marital problems, health issues, job loss, pornography, depression, opioid addiction, questioning your faith, or any combination of these or other things. Many of us are going through or have gone through these things; and we keep it bottled up, we keep it to ourselves, until it's too late. Because no one wants to make themselves look vulnerable and admit they need help.

The point is that while actions can't be taken back, neither can inaction. So consequences play out right before us in other people's lives. Families are rocked and devastated. And, we hear about it, see it all unfold, and we all think — *"Tsk. If only I had known. I could have done something"*... and then we continue on with our lives, maintaining the status quo, resolved to keep up appearances, unwilling to be vulnerable and admit our own need for help, our own struggle with that exact same issue. And so the cycle continues. This is not what it means to be the Body of Christ.

The mission of Bedford Presbyterian Church is not to, "Go and make church-attendees of all nations," it's to "make disciples of all nations."

- So, what if we were to make a New Year's resolution for the Body of Christ here at Bedford Presbyterian, to start something new?
- What if we were resolved to live both individually and together as the new body that we have already become in Christ?
- What if we made the commitment to care for one another as much as we want to take care of ourselves? To put aside all fears and vulnerabilities, and to live as the fellowship of believers in this place. To have all things in common with one another; rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn. To struggle alongside those who are struggling.

It all starts with taking the first step. Finding at least one other person in this congregation who is NOT in your family. Someone you can learn with and from. Someone you can link arms with and serve beside in this "Body of Christ." Someone who will notice when you're not in church and can say, *"Oh, they're on vacation."* Or, *"She's in the hospital again; we really need*

to pray for her. "Or, "I don't know where he's at. I'll call him after Church." That's the Body of Christ. That's the new body we are part of.

Like many new resolutions, we may fail again; and often! But, by grace and the Lord's doing, we are still part of this new body — united with all of these people, whether we like it or not! And where our sinful humanity gets in the way, there is forgiveness in Jesus. Because, week after week, if not daily, as we look back into that mirror of the Law, to see our failures and confess our need for a Savior, God is also there looking into that same mirror right along with us and saying, *"I don't see it. All I see is my perfect child. Now, get up and try it again."*

"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ... you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Happy New Year! Let's pray about this.