

“How Dear To Me Is Your Dwelling”

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Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful and enkindle in them the fire of Thy love.
Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be created.
And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.

I. Happy New Year

Good morning, and Happy New Year. Any resolutions? Well, good luck! They are, of course, notoriously hard to keep. I saw a statistic that 80% of people give up or forget their resolutions by the second week of February.

Why is it so hard to keep New Year’s Resolutions? Is it, as some articles suggest, an insufficient grasp or application of the psychology and principles of habit formation? Or is it something deeper?

Life pulls us in many directions. We are “buffeted by the winds” of the world, as the 8th century English monk St. Bede put it. Or, more recently, as Leonard Cohen wrote, “The world is all forgetting, and the heart is a rage of directions.”

It’s hard to make a change under such conditions.

Why do we want to make New Year’s Resolutions in the first place? Perhaps it’s because many of us sense a gap between who we are and who we want to be or who we should be?

And, on top of that, perhaps we’re not always entirely sure who we want to be. As life pulls us in many different directions, so do our desires. And so, it’s difficult to know, or to remember, or to act, or to center our lives on what really matters.

This is quite a predicament. As St. Paul wrote, describing this inner conflict in his own terms, “Who will rescue me? Who will deliver me?”

II. Desmond Tutu

This makes people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu all the more remarkable. Tutu, who died last Sunday at age 90, was man of integrity with a pure heart. He helped end apartheid in South Africa and afterwards was a leading advocate for peaceful reconciliation. He was looked to as the moral compass of his country. He was also known and loved for his personality: kindness, compassion, wisdom, joy, humor — even silliness; what Barack Obama called an “impish sense of humor” (have you ever heard him laugh?). He was also humble; at his funeral yesterday, his casket was a simple pine box.

He was a moral exemplar and, to use a phrase of his own, he was a God Carrier.

Tutu not only helped people; he helped people want to be better. Bernice King, daughter of MLK Jr., said: "We are better because Desmond Tutu was here."

His life was focused on what matters, and can likewise help us focus on what matters; he was a saint who can help us to see that the only thing worth living for is sanctity.

Perhaps this is why we love and are drawn to him. He was a fulfillment of this morning's opening prayer; of the wonderfully restored dignity of human nature in the birth of Christ.

So, if we love and are inspired by people like this, if we want to be more like them, why do they seem rare? Why does it seem hard to give ourselves over to such holy simplicity? And how did Desmond Tutu manage it?

III. How dear to me is your dwelling

Well, I've learned that Desmond Tutu was a lot like the Jesus in today's Gospel. In it, a 12 year old Jesus goes to Jerusalem with his parents for Passover, then stays behind in the Temple when they leave.

Jesus was at home in the Temple. He desired to be there; in the words of Psalm 84, which we recited earlier: *"How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart rejoices in the living God."*

This is the first story we get in Luke about Jesus' life after infancy, and we find him at prayer; in the Temple. Though Jesus lived an active life of service, prayer was his anchor. Desmond Tutu was the same way.

Andrew McGowan, my seminary Dean (and Jessie and Brandon's, as well), used to preach to a little group of nuns at weekday mass. I had heard this from him when I was in seminary. What I didn't know until this week was that that little group of nuns was frequently joined by a guest: Desmond Tutu. He was there because of his devotion to the Eucharist. According to Dean McGowan, his life story cannot be understood without grasping the sacramental basis on which it was founded.

Indeed, he went to church and received Communion on Christmas, the day before he died, despite his failing health.

When his parents find him, Jesus says, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This can also be translated, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

This speaks to me of the integral connection between prayer and service; between contemplation and action. Desmond Tutu's faith took him to the forefront of the struggle for justice and liberation, but it started with prayer.

From prayer and spiritual practice and devotion, we receive a spirit of wisdom; we come to know God; the eyes of our hearts become enlightened.

Through prayer we gain an inner freedom from the many directions our hearts and lives and world pull us in. Earlier, I quoted a prayer by Leonard Cohen that says "The world is all forgetting, and the heart is a rage of directions." It continues, "But your name unifies the heart, and the world is lifted into its place. Blessed is the one who waits in the traveler's heart for his turning."

IV. Resolution

So, if you will allow a suggestion for a New Year's Resolution: resolve to cultivate a deeper life of prayer, of spiritual practice; of coming to church more regularly if you don't, or, if you do, to come with a renewed commitment, attentiveness and expectation.

Because, of course it's good to change habits and behavior, but perhaps it's better to work from the inside-out than the outside-in. So why not think bigger? God is life, and to be connected to God is to be connected to life.

One of Desmond Tutu's favorite prayers was this: *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful and enkindle in them the fire of Thy love. Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be created. And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.*

When the Spirit of God fills our hearts, God's love is kindled within us, and we are sent forth in the power of that Spirit to renew the world. But to be filled with the Spirit in this way, we must make time and space in our lives for God. Just as athletes need physical conditioning, so do we, who are God's people, require spiritual conditioning.

So, may the knowledge and love of God, and of all God's saints — particularly Desmond Tutu — draw us toward the light, and keep us strong, good, kind, and loving at the beginning of this new year and at all times. Amen.