

STARTING AGAIN

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So what does the new year mean to you? A couple of days off work? A little party time? Like, what does it mean to you to have a new year? Is there anything significant about that? Is there anything important about that? Is there anything that you celebrate about that? Or is it just one more thing we just go through the motions?

Sometimes in life, we just go through the motions! You know, we just do it, because we've always done it. We don't really think about it. We're not really engaged. We're just kind of ... Right? And when life is at that level, there's not a lot of joy in Mudville, right? There's just not a lot that's deep and rich and fun. It's just motions.

For me, it's an opportunity to start again. And I have enough years in me at this point that I realize that starting again isn't always exciting. Sometimes it's hard! Sometimes we don't want to! Sometimes we just want to play that game one or two or 50,000 more times, and just play it out to the end. And sometimes we just know deep within our mind and our heart and our soul that it's over. And no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves it's not really over, we know that it is.

You know, life can be two different things. Life can be a circle. And if you've ever lived life from the point of view of a circle, you just keep going around and around and around, and the view never changes. Or life can be a spiral. And you're still going around, but every time you go around, it's from a higher point of view. And the view changes, and the advantages change, and the point of view changes. And you can see more and more each time around. And you get the sense that life is meaningful and progressive. And every year gets a little bit bigger and brighter and better. Because you're not just living the same 365 days over and over and over again. You're actually moving into a higher and higher level of life.

And one of the things about being a spiritual being and an expression of God is: you're eternal. And eternal is a long time! Right? It's a long time to be eternal. And if we're not on the spiral, you can spend a lot of time going around the same track, hoping it gets better. But it's just the same track! It's just the same experiences. It's just the same year, year after year after year.

And this year I'm going to invite you to start again. To entertain the idea that there is probably at least one area in your life where God is going to invite you into something that you have not done before. Maybe even that you don't know how to do. That might even be scary -- might even be petrifying -- to embrace the idea that your ego is going to let go of control of an area of your life and allow it to be guided and directed by a power greater than yourself.

"Richard, that's blasphemy. That's a curse word; that's awful! We don't do that!" Right? But that's really what life's all about! You get to the point where you've done the same thing over and over and over again, and at some point, your soul just says, *"Enough! Enough! I can't do this one more time! Life has to be worth more than this; it has to be better than this."*

How do you have a good new beginning? Anybody want to guess? You want to play the game? How do you have a good new beginning? Anybody want to play? Shout it out! [Congregants shout out answers] Change? Great; always a good answer. Anybody else? New, exciting adventure. Great! Does anybody else want to play? How do you have a good new beginning? Yes. Transform. All good answers!

I'm going to make the case tonight that the way that you have good new beginnings is to have good endings. And I really want you to think about some of the endings you've had in your life that might have looked like train wrecks. Everybody's had a couple of those, right? Maybe in a job or a relationship,

or a situation. And it just was a train wreck. And it was so awful that you just wanted to move into a new beginning. You didn't want to have to look at it; you didn't want to see it. You didn't want to think about it. You just wanted to move into something brand new.

But in my experience, good new beginnings happen through good endings. And all of us have the ability to have good endings. That good endings means that we were willing to feel the feelings that we were feeling in that situation, no matter how awful or hard or difficult it may have been. To feel the feelings in that situation to release them, to forgive them, so that we can move on to a higher level of good.

Because when we don't allow ourselves to have good endings, we tend to create the same situation over and over again, because we haven't really let it go. We haven't matured. We haven't expanded. We haven't lived more life in that moment.

So where in your life today are you being called to have a good ending? To forgive; to release; to let go so that you can have a great new beginning? Because this is stuff that we really have to do. And we want to pretend that we don't. We can just move quickly into the next situation. And, of course, it'll be better! *"He's going to be everything I want him to be"* or *"She's going to make every one of my dreams come alive."* Right? And so we rush into the next thing: the next business deal; the next job; the next relationship. And we are just so disappointed when we realize they've just changed the face, but the personality is exactly the same.

Has everybody had that experience where you wanted something brand new and you realized, *"Oh, my gosh! My picker is broken!"* [Congregation laughs] Right? Anybody else ever have a broken picker? Like, having a broken picker is tough, because you keep picking the same person over and over. Or the same situation or the same job. And it's tough!

But every day is an opportunity to have a new beginning and to start again. 1 Corinthians 15:31 we read - Paul said, "I must die daily." Well, that's such a happy thought! [Congregation laughs] Right? But there's a spiritual truth in that. That there's a need for all of us to let go; to die; to release; to let that which should be gone go, instead of just keep giving CPR to those things in life that we've been dragging for years. It's time to let it go. Let it go and see if your God has greater good for you in every area of your life. Because if your ego is in charge, we tend to want to do the same things over and over again.

Have you ever heard the expression, *"It's a good day to die?"* It's usually given in a context that comes from ... It's supposed to have come from a Native American. It's often said that Crazy Horse said it. And the expression that is really used is that, *"I'm ready for whatever will come."* That the actual words are, "I'm ready for whatever will come."

And I want you to really entertain that idea as we move into this new year. The idea that you have the faith and the wisdom and the strength, and that you believe in God and you believe in yourself. And that you have the ability to stand in front of this new year and say to yourself, *"I am ready for whatever will come."* Because that's a powerful individual that is willing to stand in front of uncertainty and say, *"I am ready for whatever will come,"* especially if you're over 12 years of age.

Because at a certain age, you've seen life not at its best. And when you've seen life not at its best, and you're still willing to stand in front of life and say, *"I'm ready for whatever will come,"* it's because you've discovered the power of God within you and know that God in you is greater than anything in the world. It's a sign of spiritual maturity.

Jesus said in John 3:3, *"Truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Like, there's this place where the Universe is always working to create new birth, new life, new opportunities. And we have to be big enough as people that we're not shying away from the growth or

the change or the transformation. That we are willing to embrace it and allow the goodness of God to be made manifest in us, through us, as us.

So where in your life are you being asked to start again? Where in your life? If you really slow down and tell yourself the truth, where are you being asked to start again.

Romans 12:2 says, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove that the will of God is good and acceptable and perfect."*

That's the purpose of your life: is to prove that the will of God for you is good and acceptable and perfect. You can't get there by shying away from life. You can't get there by just playing it safe and trying to live the same year over and over again, and just calling it good and calling it perfect. It actually has to be when you embrace the moment fully and allow life to surprise you, because it's going to be better than you can expect. Better than you can believe. Better than you can even hope for. But that requires a soul that is fully engaged in life and is not shying away from it ... not pulling back into small, little places that look safe. But willing to dive all the way in.

Germany Kent, a journalist, did a talk one time in which she said, *"The advice I would give my younger self,"* and she came up with four points: start where you are and start with what you have; try not to hurt other people around you; take more chances; and if you fail, try again."

So what keeps us from transformation? When you look at your own life, what keeps you from risking, from trying, from transforming? Because I think we really need to get our finger and our arms around that one. We really need to see: What is it that causes you -- when life is inviting you into something new and beautiful or unexpected -- what is it that causes you to pull back?

And I think oftentimes, for many of us, it's the belief in the reality of who we are. See, you've been you for so long, you think you are the only way that you can show up. Right? You think the way your life is the only way it can show up. But as an expression of God -- as a spiritual being -- there's an infinite number of ways that you can show up. But the longer we keep being who we've always been, the more we believe that's who we are.

And what if you were radically greater than that? What if the Spirit of God in you was radically greater than that? And what if you had to experience yourself in new situations with new surroundings and new opportunities to really know your own greatness?

What if life has to evolve and transform and change for you to know the full, total expression of God that you are?

There's a story in Matthew. And I'm going to tell it tonight. And it's one of those stories that, the first time I heard it, I was probably 13, 14 years old. I'm guessing. And I remember the first time I heard this Bible story, my first thought was, *"Oh, my gosh, I hope that never happens to me."*

Have you ever read anything in the Bible and heard a Bible story, and you're like [forms a cross with his fingers as if to ward off evil] *"No way!"* [Congregation laughs] *"Like, no way, man! Pass that one! That's got to be somebody else's name on that one. I don't want that one!"*

So here's the Bible story that I really thought was interesting:

And behold, one came to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" And he said, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There's only one that's good. And if you would enter eternal life, keep the commandments."

[Laughs] And I identify with this rich, young ruler. Because he's kind of a ... he's kind of a smart ... young person. [Congregation laughs] Right?

And he said, "Which one?"

Right? And I love that! You know, here you are standing in front of this holy presence, and you say, "What do I need to have eternal life," and he says, "Just go do the commandments." And you're so full of yourself you say, "Which one?"

And Jesus said, "You should not kill, you should not commit adultery. You should not steal. You should not bear false witness. You should honor your mother and father. You should love your neighbor as yourself."

And the young man said, "All these I have observed since I was a child. What do I still lack?"

God, I love his ego! I love his arrogance, right? Like, "Pfff! Please, I've done 'em all! What else you got? Come on, big guy! You're the one that's teaching this stuff! What else you got? This is Old Testament; this is old school. You've got to have something fresh! You've got to have something new! What else you got?" [Laughs]

And Jesus said to him, "Alright, big boy." [Congregation laughs] That's a bit of a paraphrase. But it's really the intent. He says, "Alright, big boy!"

Jesus said, "If you want to go and be perfect, then I would have you sell all your possessions. Give the money to the poor, and you will find that your treasure is in heaven. And then come and follow me."

And the young man heard this, and turned and walked away sadly, for he had great possessions.

And I think about that. How many times does that apply to our own lives? That God asks us to take our next step -- Spirit of God is revealing something we need to be doing -- and the price is too high. We turn and we say, "Well, I can't pay that; I won't do that; I won't give that one up. That one's too important to me. I've gotta have my stuff. My red Ferrari just looks really nice; I don't want to give that one up. My Pinto; I'd be happy to give that one up." [Congregation laughs] "My '72 Pinto with a lot of miles; here you go, God; I'm a generous guy. Take it away! But that little red Ferrari thing; that's just kind of slick."

Seventeen years ago, I had to give it all up. I don't talk about this story a lot. [Chokes up] Seventeen years ago ... [Chokes up] Sorry. The life that I knew stopped. Seventeen years ago, within less than 90 days ... [Sobbing quietly] Sorry; I thought I could do this.

My dad died. I left this church. And I got divorced. [Deep, shaky sigh]

[Voice breaking] And I knew it was coming. I knew it was coming. And I did everything to try to stop it. [Sobbing quietly] Sorry. To try to stop it. See, my life was perfect. [Breathes deeply] My wife; my kids. It all looked perfect. Even my dog was perfect. [Sobbing quietly] Sorry. And I had to give it all up for me; for myself; for my life.

And in the divorce, I gave everything away. I literally gave everything away. And my friends said, "Don't do that; that's stupid!" I said, "I know, and I have to do it anyway." I literally cleared the deck. I didn't know what I was going to do for a job or a life, or where I was going to live. [Voice breaking] And it was the hardest thing I've ever done.

But somehow it worked. I lived. [Voice breaking] My life ... And I can't say it's better ... But it's better. [Sobbing quietly] And it was the hardest thing.

[Voice breaking] I know what it's like to give it all away. And to be empty. And to be scared. [Breathes deeply to gather himself] But there's freedom there.

You know, when you're standing on the edge of the cliff and God says, "Jump," you're looking down that cliff and it's a pretty big fall. And you know that one of two things are going to happen. The first one is:

There's a high probability that you're going to be a big splat right down there. And it's not going to work. And your ego is screaming, "*It's not going to work.*" But the other probability is that you're going to learn to fly. And you're not sure how you're ever going to learn to fly between here and down there, but somehow it works. Somehow you survive.

You know, when I left this ministry 17 years ago, I never thought I'd go into a church again. I just never thought I'd be a minister again. It was over. And then the most amazing thing happened. Exactly seven years later -- which in the Bible is a time of completion -- I was invited to come back. Talk about a shock! And it was amazing! That I needed to go do my seven years in ... you know, it wasn't quite the wilderness, but sometimes it felt like it. And then to be invited back was a very good thing.

Tonight, here's what I want you to hear me say. From the bottom up, I know how hard it is to let go. And I know how hard it is to start again. And to trust God with literally everything. And it looks crazy. And your ego will scream. But in that level of letting go, your faith is forever changed. Because there's a level of confidence that whatever life asks of you, you know that you're more than that. That you're greater than that.

Sometimes we have to let go to the things that we never wanted to let go of. That young man didn't believe that he could let go of all of his stuff, and it would ever be given back to him. And he really robbed himself of the spiritual realization that God wants only good for us. Truly, deeply, profoundly good.

I know what I'm asking tonight is a lot. I'm asking you to honor, to listen, to the voice of God within you that is asking you -- in one or two, maybe more areas of your life -- to let go of what has been so something brand new can be born. I know it's a lot. But there's something so very special about trusting God that much and watching it become even better than you can imagine. It's a game-changer.

So tonight, if you tell yourself the truth, where are you being asked to start again? Where are you being asked to let go of the small and the limited and the broken and the things that don't fit? That just don't work? Where are you being asked to let it go and to trust that God's got a better plan for your life? Can you trust it? Can you believe it? And can you see that God has greater good?

Will you pray with me?

Today I want you to take a deep breath with me. [Deep breath] And I want you to imagine giving it all to God. Whatever it is ... giving your whole life to God and saying, "Thy will be done." Putting it all on the table. And trusting that there is a power greater than your ego that is at work for your highest good.

Thank you, God, for my life reborn. My life remade. For a life that is built on faith. That it's actually easier than it's every been before. In all things I look to you, God, and in all things I give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

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