

RESTART YOU!

Acts 9:1-20

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
4 January 2015

The poet Mary Oliver has this haunting question in one of her works: “Listen - are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?” It’s a new year’s question. It’s a question for a time of new beginnings. For the next seven weeks, we’re going to be talking about the power we each have to make changes in our lives. The idea for this series came about during a conversation I had with Nate late last fall. We were talking about some of our hopes and dreams for the church, some of our ideas for projects in this new year of 2015. I told him that this year is a new beginning for me. This past Wednesday was the end of my 20th year here at Avon Lake UCC, and January 1 the beginning of my third decade in ministry at this church, which seems quite hard to believe.

This has not seemed like the same job for 20 years. The church has been growing and changing but also, I am so grateful that this church has given me continuous opportunities for growth. My Doctor of Ministry degree, a sabbatical, and yearly continuing education - they make it possible for me to stay fresh, to learn from my colleagues, to bring back new ideas. I try hard to take the time I need to recharge my own spiritual batteries. I find it absolutely necessary to take some time each week, and longer periods of time during the year for reflection, thinking, praying, for reading and writing. It’s true in my personal life and in my call here as well.

I hope that each of you has some time, takes some time, for reflection at the beginning of this new year. I hope you do it gently, with grace and forgiveness for your shortcomings, and I hope you do it with openness, aware of the possibilities that God has for your life. It isn't just a self-help practice, it's a spiritual practice. If we are serious when we say that life is a gift from God, then let's treat this gift as a precious possession and live with intention. It's so easy to get caught up in busyness, for our days and years to be spent without much awareness of what we're doing with our time. Most of us aren't doing bad things with our time. In fact, many of us are doing things that are quite loving and productive. But are we creating the best lives for ourselves, are we living up to God's purposes?

It's a spiritual exercise, to reflect on where we've been and where we're going, to consider the gifts and talents God has given us and ask, "Am I using them, and my unique set of experiences, in the best possible way?" Our scripture for this entire series is the verse from I Corinthians which says that when we are in Christ, we are new creations. Change is possible. God wants us to change. God helps us change. The power of Christ, at work in us, will give us the power to transform our lives.

That change can happen in many ways. Sometimes, we make small incremental changes in the way we live...changes that, over time, make us new and different people. Sometimes we make a conscious decision to change and we do it, relying on willpower. Sometimes the impetus to change the course of our lives comes from something that happens to us. Sometimes change is forced upon us by events we wouldn't have chosen for ourselves. An illness, a death, the loss of a relationship - nothing we asked

for, nothing we wanted, yet they open up opportunities in our lives. We can spend the rest of our lives complaining, or playing the martyr, feeling sorry for ourselves, or we can seize the moment and make the most of a new path. And sometimes change occurs with an out-of-the-blue surprise.

I heard a fascinating interview last week with a man named George Monbiot. He is a journalist whose most recent book is about the environment, and about what we lose as people when we lose touch with the wild, natural world. What motivated him to begin writing about the environment was an experience he had one day near his home in Wales. He tells the story this way. "I've always loved the natural world, but something happened one day when I was sea kayaking close to my home in Wales. I'd gone a couple of miles off the coast in a very lumpy sea. It was a very stupid thing to do, extremely dangerous. There was about a ten foot swell, it was a bad day to be out. The waves were smacking straight into the sea wall. I was sitting there, about 200 yards from shore, wondering how I was going to get back. The beach had completely disappeared. The waves were getting bigger and bigger and were everywhere. Suddenly, from behind me, I heard this enormous noise, and I thought, "Oh, I'm about to be hit with a giant wave, and then I saw, right next to me, a huge dolphin fin, all pitted and scarred, and then I heard the noise again and a 13 foot bull dolphin was flying straight over my head, and as he went back down into the water, he turned his head and for a split second we looked straight into each other's eyes. And then he went and I never saw him again. I was left with a heart-thumping feeling of exhilaration and intensity, such as I'd never had before. And then I turned and faced the shore, and I

noticed something in my heightened sense of awareness, that there was a tiny roadway of still water that I could make my way towards and get back on dry land. I leapt out of the boat and was safe. That dolphin saved my life, and changed my perspective on the world. That split-second of communication is one I'll never forget."

One experience shifted the direction of his life, yet he noticed it, he was aware of it, and he let himself be moved by it. It happens that way sometimes. A woman is playing with her daughter in the playground. The little girl says, "You can't catch me, Mom!" The mother realizes she cannot. She's too out of breath from smoking, out of shape in general. She decides to change her life. She changes her diet, she begins walking, then becomes a runner. Making those changes made her believe she could make others, too, including finding a more fulfilling career. One baby step led to another and to a happier life.

The story goes that a man named Saul was part of the Persecuting Christian Movement at the time of the early church. Just as Jesus stirred up opposition in his lifetime, the early Christians continued to breed controversy. People were unsure of their message and their teachings, Rome was still suspicious, there were several reasons for the persecutions. As Saul is walking down the road, he sees a bright light, and hears a voice who asks, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" The light blinds him and he spends three days and nights in the dark, without food or drink. We know what happens to God's people after three days in the tomb. They are reborn, made new, given new life. Saul regains his sight, is given a new name, and immediately his life takes a 180 turn. Instead of persecuting Christians, he is preaching the good news, and

becomes, of course, the one to plant new churches throughout the region, leaving behind letters we still read and learn from today. It is one of the most dramatic conversion stories in the Bible, but not without similarities. We see others who are given new names, new vocations, new beginnings.

Too often we size people up, we label them, and we think, “that’s just who they are; they’ll never change.” Too often we say the same thing about ourselves. “I’ve been this way for _____years; I don’t suppose I’m going to change now.” Do we believe in a God who has the power to transform? Do we believe in the power of Christ at work within us? Throughout the Bible, we see God’s people changing. We profess faith in a God who says, over and over again, “Look, I’m making all things new.” We are made new every time we touch the waters of baptism. We are nourished for new life every time we eat at the communion table.

This year, be open to the ways in which God will surprise you and show you a new direction. It might happen so suddenly you’ll be shocked. It might come from a child’s voice, or an appearance in nature. It might happen when you reflect on a hard question, “Listen - are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?”

There is amazing good news this year. We are new creations. The old has passed away, the new has come, and we are all given the power to restart our lives.

Let us pray by renewing together our baptismal vows: