Invocation

Help us prepare for New Year

May we find new ways to become closer to you and bring joy into our lives

Opening prayer

Lord, you make all things new

You bring hope alive in our hearts

And cause our spirit to be born again

Thank you for this new year

For all the potential it holds

Come and kindle in us

A Mighty flame

So that in our time, many will see the wonders of God

And live forever to praise your glorious name

Romans 12:2 Conform no longer to the pattern of this present world but be transformed by the renewal of your minds. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

Philippians 2:12-14 (The Message version) Rejoicing Together What I am getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you’ve done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I’m separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God’s energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure. Do everything readily and cheerfully – no bickering, no secondguessing allowed! Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God. Carry the light-giving Message into the night so I’ll have good cause to be proud of you on the day that Christ returns. You’ll be living proof that I didn’t go to all this work for nothing.

Good morning – my name is Jon Gaylord and I’m your lay-minster for today.

New Years is a time that some make resolutions. I suggest forming habits may be a beginning of a habit.

My belief is a habit.

Being spiritual is isn’t easy, I’ve had to work at it. For me to do that, I’ve had to change the way I approached life, searching for activities and thoughts that bring serenity and bring me closer to God. For me, this needed to be things that I did regularly, without thinking or planning to do – habits.

I’ve been attending church on and off all my life, but for over half my life I have worked on turning my life over to a higher power. Before that, spirituality was not a major part of my life.

Miracles happen – it’s a part of believing. I didn’t realize it at the time, but a miracle changed my life.

A little background ... over forty years ago, my life was in a downward spiral. I was drinking heavily for a means of escape – the escape was becoming increasingly difficult to reach. From a work-related incident, I had gone through recovery, but went back to drinking.

While drinking, I got into a fight and was punched in the eye with a fist wearing a heavy ring. The attending doctor at the hospital emergency room unsuccessfully tried to save the eye. Over the next year, I continued drinking, alternating between short periods of accomplishments and longer periods of aimlessness, grand delusions, not caring and despair. At the end, I was begging(praying) God to relieve my depression and help me to feel good.

One night, while drunk, I had gone to a liquor store. My normal route was blocked by the annual street fair. I took a route that passed the hospital where I had previously gone through recovery. I purchased the beer and was on the way home. Inexplicably, I checked myself into recovery – with a half case of beer sitting in the backseat of my car.

Looking back, my prayers were answered – this was my miracle, and I found myself willing to do anything to **guard t**he miracle.

The miracle was confirmed by the eye doctor attending me when I lost my eye. For the next 20 years until he retired, on my annual exam, he told me I was a miracle. When he had first seen me in the emergency room, he thought I was on the way to killing myself.

I had to find a higher power. At first it was nature because even in worse of times I could visualize the beauty. It seemed like I was viewing the world in a completely different way. No more delusions, I was now dealing with reality. I realized that I needed a higher power to guide and help me make better choices. Although I started to release my control of my life to a higher power, I found myself occasionally slipping and trying to take back control. I needed and wanted to be closer to a higher power.

After finding a higher power, I found myself developing habits that were good for me that are not primarily religious. Some habits I already had, others needed to be developed.

On the very top of my list was facing the reality of who I am and what I cannot do. I need to lose bad habits. The last major bad habit I dropped several years ago was smoking.

Also on the top of my list of habits is taking a personal daily inventory of what I did that was negative. This helps in looking at ways to improve on the things I did badly and let them go. This has freed me from dwelling on actions and thoughts that are negative. To balance, also looking at the positive, not only gives me a good feeling but also reinforces those actions and thoughts.

At same time I stopped drinking I realized I needed to get out of myself and find new or renew interests and push myself to be more socially involved. One interest I had was flowers and in particular orchids. I joined an orchid society and served in various capacities including treasurer, newsletter editor and being in charge of lining up speakers and their accommodations.

Unbelievably, the company where I was working (McGaw Laboratories) before I sobered up, in spite of all my problems, put up with me while I went thru recovery twice and then promoted me into a start of the new career path that I stayed on until I retired 38 years later.

McGaw sent me to a stress management seminar. A takeaway for me was that listening to baroque music helps in focusing and learning. I added baroque music to the music I listen to, and at a bare minimum I enjoy the music and find it soothing. It has become a habit that’s good for me.

Near the top of the list of habits is getting in the “FLOW.”

After high school, I had started my college career at Cal Poly as a Landscape Architecture major and had visited the Claremont Colleges as part of my classes (and a couple parties). I decided that that if I ever had to chance to go to Claremont, to go, based mainly just on how great the campus looked (very Ivy League) and little bit on their reputation.

After my recovery, McGaw was bought by a company headquartered (by Kendell, a company that makes disposable diapers) in Massachusetts that had a great education benefit (for going to Harvard, MIT?). This was my chance to go to Claremont Graduate School to get a master’s degree.

I read a psychology book “flow” by a psychology professor at one of the Claremont colleges. The book discussed what FLOW is and how it works.

One example of FLOW is something challenging, like mountain climbing. The person is so focused on what he is doing that he doesn’t notice the passing of time or think about the past or future – he only sees what he is currently doing at the present moment. By focusing on my work, I found myself starting the day at work, focusing on the work I’m doing, looking up and seeing its time to call it a day. FLOW is not something you can do without focusing, practicing and being mindful. FLOW also needs for you to have a vocation that you are good at and enjoy.

All this plus volunteering to answers the phones at AA forced me to make commitments which previously had been unimaginable. With new habits came making commitments and reaching out.

The development of making commitments and reaching out led to my willingness to share my interests and expertise.

Also, one of the habits I noticed I already had when I sobered up was respect of other living things. I’ve expanded that to include myself. The example of saying thank you mindfully makes me recognize that people are helping people. The habit is thinking about saying thank you when appropriate, and saying it when I mean it. For me, saying thank you is recognition of someone being of service to me. It may also give the person a good feeling for the recognition.

I found that another habit I’ve always had is being enthusiastic and sharing that enthusiasm about the knowledge, thoughts and interests I have. On my retirement this month, several of my Co-workers shared that when they started work they remembered that sharing my enthusiasm introducing them both that happiness and joy come with enthusiasm, it makes me grateful to God.

Also high on my list of habits is humility: the recognition of my small part in the universe and that I’m blessed to be who I am – acceptance – no delusions about life. Reality is better than fiction. Where before I looked at what could happen in the future, now I try to live in the moment.

Flash forward - Carolyn and I had a regular walk that passed this church and we decided to start attending. When we started going to bible study, I wanted a list of activities that needed to be accomplished in order maintain and grow spiritually. Unfortunately, there wasn’t such a list – there isn’t an easy way.

Later, our interest in baroque music helped in us getting socially involved in the group that organizes and supports the annual Baroque Music Festival. I haven’t volunteered yet, but just going activities in addition to the festival gives me feeling of belonging. I’m sure this will lead breaking the Navy rules (and one I had) of “never volunteering”.

Curiosity helps my spiritual adventure by looking and studying ideas and activities. Being interested has been found to help keep the mind active and not atrophying. With curiosity comes a willingness to be open-minded and a willingness to change. This willingness means dropping habits that no longer are needed, wanted or even that you started but were not able to continue.

The church’s previous minister called it ‘Time with the spirit’. For me it’s Meditation - a habit I continue to develop. It’s helpful in keeping in the moment and freeing the mind. These two things allow me be closer to God.

Believing is a commitment. It was difficult for me to make commitments (other than being present and on time). I have made an effort which I feel is now a habit. If a task, obligation or long-term relationship is something I am considering, I verbalize the feeling and importance. If it is important to me, I fully commit. An example is my promise to the church. I carefully consider before promising.

I’m grateful for the beauty of nature and have made viewing nature a habit. Things I see daily sometimes make me stop in amazement (just a little lower on the scale from a miracle). The habit, I propose, is looking for the beauty in living things and taking the time to enjoy them.

I’ve realized the importance of interacting with people. Due to my isolation in my younger days and already being an introvert, this may be the hardest habit for me to develop. I do feel comfortable one-on-one and in groups that I know are “safe.”

Exercise – for me, walking, yoga, the gym and hopefully adding back tennis and swimming – is a necessity. If it isn’t a habit, other activities always seem to have priority. By making exercise a habit, the time for doing it is always there. Exercise is necessary for me for good health, which I feel links to being able to do the other habits. On my walking at work ( which as usually 1 to 2 hours a day) I listened to books and one I listened to was Bill Byrson’s ‘A Walk in the Woods’. After that I made a goal of hiking part of the pacific crest trail. The last couple years of been doing longer and longer hiking trips and spending more time preparing physically.

The habit that involves gratitude is looking for the opportunity to be grateful. Over the years I seem to have developed this habit, as I find myself more frequently being grateful and saying it.

There are always habits that I would like to develop, and I know they would be good for me. Being of service – occasionally I find myself “raising my hand,” and I try to always say yes when asked to serve.

But it isn’t habit yet.

Here are some of the habits that are directly related to church: going to church, praying, reading the bible and being of service.

The church also has habits – rituals that help congregations focus their minds and hearts on belief, the scripture and the sermon. This includes having same structure of the service, on Sunday at the same time. This relieves having to remember and how it works.

The congregation is open to the meaning of the church, its community and the message.

Other rituals help the congregation have a feeling of belonging. Communion and baptism give a strong feeling of belonging to the church. Coming from a military family that moved frequently, I had never been baptized as a child. We have a framed picture (that Vicki Ronaldson took) of me just after being baptized in the ocean, and it reminds me of the joy and the feeling of belonging at that moment.

The purpose of developing habits is to be good to yourself by working continually to be closer to God.

I used to brag that I was lucky in that my life would take a tailspin into depression and ‘bottom out’, only to bounce back to better place. I used even want that to happen. Now I realize that my life and where I’m at in that is shared with God. I looked up to my father who was career Navy officer – I always was thought he should have been an admiral. I now realize he didn’t want to be admiral – he wanted to be exactly where he was – and engineering officer that enjoyed life and what he was doing. After recovery I used to kid my boss that “that I only do what I want to do”. What I meant was ‘I like what I do and happy with that’. There was realization I had found the path I was looking for and would make the effort to stay on that path.

For New Years, I’m spending time with the spirit rather than making resolutions. I found by doing this my life took a direction I couldn’t have dreamed.

Benediction

May your day be filled with happiness – to love and enjoy people, animals, and nature. Be kind to yourself and become closer to God by your actions, words, and thoughts.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Me-high Cheek- sent-me-high)