



Roanoke, Virginia

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“A Different Sort of Resolution”

Philippians 1:9-11

George C. Anderson

The course of my preaching was set in seminary when I read Fred Craddock’s book, *Overhearing the Gospel*. While I hope my preaching has improved over the years, I still am guided by the insights of a book I read four decades ago.

I’ll never forget the first line; a Kierkegaard quote Craddock used as the text for the whole book:

“There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one cannot directly communicate to the other.”

I needed to hear that. I was a recent graduate of college where I majored in philosophy and drama. I took those philosophy classes seriously. I earned A’s because I had this idea that I could *think my way* to God and also *think my way* to being a better person. But, having graduated, I found I was still trying to figure out God and still trying to be the person I felt God wanted me to be. I had to face it: faith is not an intellectual achievement. Knowledge matters, of course. Faith needs to be informed. But faith itself is something that is —in formed—formed within.

The same can be said of virtue. Virtue needs to be learned, but by the heart, not by the head. Knowledge matters of course but knowing is not living.

I think scouting, at its best, illustrates what I mean. We have an all-girls boy scout troop here at Second Presbyterian. Those girls memorize and recite what I once memorized and still can recite, that a scout is (and I invite scouts to say it with me if you like) *“trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.”* You can’t earn a single rank in scouting without memorizing that list. Yet,



good Scout leaders know that the boys or girls in their troops don't become those things simply by memorizing those words. Scouts won't become those things even if they did a deep-dive study of what each word means. Something *else* is needed, and it is a something which the one scout cannot directly communicate to the other.

So, what do scouts do instead?

Attend scout meetings.

Learn to tie knots correctly.

Prepare for hikes and camping out and then doing them,

Learn to cook, start a fire, and leave a place better than they find it.

Practice skills until they earn merit badges.

And watch and learn from scouts who have been around longer
and have higher ranks.

When scouting happens *as it is supposed to happen*, virtues are learned, and character is formed, through practice and habits so that a day can come when what is memorized and said by the ten-year-old girl or boy so as to be allowed to become a scout is said *about* the young woman or man who has earned the rank of Eagle:

He is “[trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, and kind.](#)”

She is “[obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.](#)”

Today is January 1, and a tradition of this day is to make resolutions. Is it possible to resolve to be one of those virtues you just heard? Or how about one of those virtues listed by the Apostle Paul when in the letter to the church in Corinth he lists the spiritual gifts? Is it possible to, in 2023, resolve to show more “[love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.](#)”

Memorize that list and you'll have a list memorized. But knowing is not being. The Apostle Paul understood that about himself. “[I do not do those things I know to be good,](#)” he said, “[but I do the very things I know to be wrong.](#)” There was no lack of information for Paul. Something else was lacking when he fell short of what he knew to be good and right, it was something which the one cannot directly communicate to the other.

Knowing this about himself and knowing this about others, when Paul writes to the church in Philippi to encourage them to grow in their faith, the *first* thing he encourages is not that they learn more, though he certainly wants them to learn. It's not the first thing though. Listen:

⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Paul says to love. Isn't that nice? Makes you want to say, “Aww.”



Until you really listen to what Paul says. He is not calling for love, but a particular kind of love, a kind of love for what really matters so that the Philippians can be more pure and blameless and produce more a harvest of what is right. You see, we have to be *careful about what we love*... because everyone loves. We're wired that way.

1. What is it that a dictator loves?

What is it that Hitler, that Stalin, loved?

2. What is it that the gambler whose family is in financial turmoil loves?

3. What is it that the gamer loves when family, study, and hygiene are ignored?

If one of your resolutions this year is to read a book on faith, you might think about reading the book James K. A. Smith wrote called, *You Are What You Love*. Smith explains what more and more researchers of the brain, and what more and more psychologists and anthropologists, are trying to tell us. If we can get past being literal about what, biologically, is the head and the heart and go back to what is being said metaphorically, about the noggin that learns and the heart that loves, then we can hear what both modern researchers and ancient sages are trying to say about

head and heart—

knowledge and intuition—

thinking and believing,

knowing and loving.

They would want you to know that I just got everything backwards. In general—for the most part—

it is the heart that leads the head,

it is intuition that leads to our knowing,

it is believing that guides how we think,

and it is what we love that inspires what we learn.

Brain specialists, psychologists, and anthropologists say this is true for every last one of us,

believers and atheists,

scientists and artists,

workaholics, welfare abusers

and those work/balance people I would like to be a part of one day.

All of us, it is true of all of us...

that our devotions become who we are.

As I said, ancient sages said this a long time ago. Consider St. Augustine who said, “**Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.**” This is Augustine’s famous prayer found in his *Confessions*.” Without the benefit of modern science or psychology, Augustine got it right about how we tick. And, after him, John Calvin got it right when he said that our



hearts are “[factories of idols](#).” And if I can jump over the Enlightenment to today, consider how the aforementioned Smith puts it. He says that the heart is “[an erotic compass](#).”

That sounds sexy, but Smith doesn’t mean it that way. He means that we human beings are wired to love. It is the heart that directs life, so training the heart is the key to become those things that Paul described as fruits of the spirit.

And how is the heart trained? How are the virtues learned?

Not by head learning. By heart learning. And habits are what train the heart.

Actually, it is a two-way street. Habits are also what reveal the heart. To diagnose what people truly love, don’t listen to what they say. Do an audit of habits.

Those who listen to music? I bet they love to listen to music.

You don’t need them to tell you they love it, you see it.

Those who love to play music, play it.

Those who love gaming, game.

Those who love drinking, or at least whatever it is that drinking does for them,
drink.

Those who are in love with themselves, practice being selfish.

Those who love being generous, are generous.

Habits reveal the heart’s hungers. And if you want to change the hunger—
say lust for power at the cost of the good
or lust for pleasure at the cost of responsibility—

then the heart needs to be recalibrated by changing habits with the hope that the heart learns to love that to which the habits are directed.

I don’t want to lose you. I know that some of you might have stayed up past what is the bedtime for Millie and me on New Year’s night, which is 9:00 pm. Maybe what you ate and drank was not the best prep for listening to a sermon. So, I’ll stop with theory and give some illustrations that, I think, make obvious sense.

Sports

I try not to offer too many sports illustrations. I have to remind myself that not everyone appreciates how historic and inspiring it was that my 10 and 11-year-old girls soccer team won the Mississippi State championship, and not everyone appreciates the lessons of the profound documentary that is *The Last Dance*.

I’ll at least keep it short. Knowing the rules of baseball—
knowing the different pitches that pitchers throw
or the advisable outfield alignments
when a certain batter comes to the plate—
even understanding the infield fly rule—
does not a baseball player make.



Knowing is important, but a baseball player is formed through practice and habits.

Child-Rearing

Ancient wisdom about rearing a child is exemplified by the proverb that says, “**Raise up the child in the way the child should go.**”¹ The *way* the child should go. A child’s mind needs knowledge. But to educate the child’s heart, character, and faith is a different thing. It is about instilling habits. Those habits may not at first be what the child wants to do, but they are the best way of directing the heart toward where the habits point. You learn to love cleanliness by being clean, kindness by being kind, responsibility by being responsible, forgiveness by forgiving. The only way all the virtues listed by Paul are learned is by their practice.

Smith has an interesting way of describing habits. He calls them “liturgies.” He calls them liturgies because they are practices designed to direct hearts toward desires. Just as liturgy in worship is designed to draw our hearts and minds toward God, so too do the habits of our lives draw us toward our heart’s devotions.

I get what Smith is saying, but so that I don’t sound preacherly, I’m going to suggest a different image, and that is a *Habit House*. A structure of habits is built around what we love and by maintaining that structure, we love what we love even more.

- That’s why those who love family are wise to build a Habit House around family. They build routine, chores, traditions, and planned time around devotion to family. And, sadly, when family is taken for granted and those habits are neglected, the heart can be redirected away.
- So, it is with God. Learning to love God, and love what is of God, takes practice, so those who love God build a *Habit House of Spirituality*. You build routines, chores, traditions, and planned time around practicing the virtues that are of God. And, sadly, when God is taken for granted and those habits are redirected, the heart can be directed away.

I wish I had chosen “Habit House” for my sermon’s title..., or maybe “Habit for Humanity.” That’s the problem with having to provide a Sunday sermon title on Wednesday. But here is why I chose the title, “A Different Kind of Resolution.” If most resolutions are about doing something good, how would you make a resolution about some way of *being* good? Choose a virtue. What kind of Habit House can you build around that virtue?

¹ Proverbs 22:6



This being Sunday, and this place being a sanctuary, I have no hesitation in urging those who want to find direction by following Jesus to be intentional in building a Habit House around love of God.

Yes, learn what Christians should learn. But become. Worship weekly, pray daily, give generously...

I encourage the disciplines of church, but not because church is the point. Becoming is the point. Becoming those described by Paul's fruits of the Spirit is the point. So, resolve yourself to habits.

Show kindness to learn to love being kind
Be empathetic to learn to love others for who they are,
Be generous to learn to love being generous,
Forgive regularly to learn to love reconciliation.

To resolve to be a better person—OK, this being church, to resolve to be a better Christian—is to build and maintain the habits of doing what Jesus did among us, and so, learn to love as Jesus loved, and to know God as Jesus knew God.

