

Promises we make to ourselves

Are New Year resolutions promises we make to ourselves? Are “foxhole prayers” bargains we try to strike with God, promising to do better? Do promises to ourselves matter as much as promises to others? Who holds us accountable to promises we make to ourselves? Wow, this sermon seems to have a lot more questions than answers so let me try to dig in.

This topic came up because, I don’t know about you, but a crisis seems to bring my priorities into focus. The crisis can be a pandemic but in the past it has been a health challenge or a natural disaster and the ensuing loss. When you don’t have electricity, being able to charge your phone in the car becomes waaay more critical! When you think you might not have a lot more days, what you do with this day becomes more intentional. When you can’t physically connect, finding other ways to connect becomes more of a project you feel like tackling. In this pandemic, we may find ourselves evaluating our priorities and feeling compelled to make some new promises to ourselves. Let’s look at that process.

Of course, I start with a definition. Webster calls a promise a noun that is “a declaration that something will or will not happen or be given.” Interestingly, as a verb, promise is “grounds for expectancy”. I love that expectancy. Sounds like faith. I wondered what the dictionary said was the difference between a promise and a vow. Turns out a vow is a “solemn promise.” I guess I would maybe use the word “sacred” rather than solemn. So maybe the title of the sermon should be “vows we make.”

At New Year’s beginning, we tend to compile lists of things we intend to do. We mean well. We hope for the best. The year is a blank slate in front of us so there is definitely plenty of opportunity. Yet is there motivation enough to get us past the first couple weeks? We have done a white stone in the past to get us to focus on potentials and new ways of being, rather than doing. Still, does the promise carry through? I guess I can be using promise as both a noun and a verb in the question, “Does the promise carry through.” Does our vow continue to guide us and do we bring the potential and expectancy of **who we are** into manifestation? **We are spiritual beings!** Do we live that way beyond the first two weeks of the calendar year?

What is the last crisis you can remember? Did you offer up any “foxhole prayers”? Foxhole prayers are those connections we open ourselves up to when we are “under fire” or “hitting rock bottom” and suddenly surrendering our will to a higher power doesn’t seem like such a bad idea after all.

Some people call it desperation but I find it is more like surrendered. We begin to let go of the idea that we can do everything all on our own and we open up to the guidance and strength that has been within us all along. Ego mind just told us we didn't need that spiritual stuff—willpower and our keen mind had this handled. Sometimes, not so much. In a crisis of any origin we tend to become a little more open to help. It's really co-creating with the divine. It's accepting the other wing we need to rise up.

The last time you were in a crisis did you make any promises to yourself? Maybe it was a promise about doing something differently. Maybe it was a promise about being different. The question is, did you make a change? The complexity of change tricks us and may be part of why it is so challenging. Anyone overcoming an addiction can tell you that change is not just one isolated factor. It is not just to not drink, or not do drugs, or not gamble or not ...whatever the addiction is. It is examining the psychological underpinnings of addiction and the whole gamut of changes that empower us to move through that “not doing” choice **every moment of every day**. I so admire the courage and tenacity of individuals who choose a new path out of addiction.

When we make a promise or a sacred vow to ourselves, who holds us accountable? We do. When I say, “We do”, I kind of really do mean it to be plural. Me, myself and I. When I hold myself accountable, is there only one voice in my head? Absolutely NO! There is ego mind which rationalizes everything. There is intellect—heavily influenced by ego mind—which tries to figure out the logic and morality of what is really right. And then there is spirit self, my true nature.

It's in Matthew that we find words you may be familiar with about letting your yes be yes and your no be no. There is a second part to the quote we might not hear. “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; **anything more than this comes from the evil one.**” Now Unity doesn't believe in the devil. There is nothing outside of us to blame. That doesn't mean there isn't a part of us within that is honestly sometimes opposed to our sacred self. Remember Pinocchio and the scenes with Jiminy Cricket on one shoulder? But there was a different voice coming from the other shoulder. When we hold ourselves accountable, there is a part of ourselves in alignment with Spirit that will respond clearly yes or no. The dilemma becomes allowing that response to be heard over the rationalizations for yes or no that comes from the other voices. “It doesn't hurt to do it just this once.” The “It” can be **not** doing what we intend to do or **doing** what we intend not to do. Part of us can always think of a reason to not walk the path of the truth we know. Often, not walking the path seems the easier way in the moment. Long range, do we do ourselves a favor off the path?

Farther along in Matthew, over in chapter 7 we find: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.”

When I started paying attention to my diet I learned a lot about the narrow gate and the destruction of the wide road. I am gluten sensitive and pretty sensitive to sugar. For most of my life I have loved pasta, bread and a whole lot of things that have sugar in them. I carried extra weight and did not feel a lot of energy, even if I was constantly busy. Doing a cleanse and then adding things back, I discovered my body had a pretty instant reaction to gluten and sugar. Not a good reaction! It takes focus to keep making the right choices because the world around us often joins the voice in our head saying, “Just a little won’t hurt.” Actually, yes it does. My no should be no!

So do we need to keep a long list of things to do and not do in our head to keep us walking through the narrow gate? You can but you can also try this oversimplification I find pretty helpful most of the time. Just ask, “What would love do?” Love God, Love your neighbor, Love yourself. Not much that we contemplate falls outside those relationships—which really are ALL just Love God but if ego mind wants to distract itself into three categories, we’ll use all three. Is it loving to myself to eat what I know triggers a painful reaction? Rationalizations aside, the easy answer is No. Is it loving to skip the stretching exercises that keep me moving? No.

This pandemic has revealed a lot. I’m not talking about politics. I’m talking about priorities. It is **not** easy for us as a society to care as much about others as about ourselves. The gap between the haves and the have nots is widening and with each millimeter of separation the have nots lose the power to influence policy making. Everyone does not have the same access to education, healthcare, economic resources but again, do we care how others fare if we are ok? When was the last time we thought about loving our neighbors? My life is way too busy. Even in a home quarantine, I do not currently find myself with empty hours. How do I love myself enough to say no to some of the busy-ness? Being still is good for our planet and Mother Earth yearns to heal. Is it loving God everywhere present to return to spewing toxins in the air and water? In this pandemic, how important have the minimum wage folks been in the grocery stores, delivery work, facility maintenance and warehouses? Do we have a new respect for the dedication of teachers and healthcare workers? How does that translate into support for living wages and better working conditions for our neighbors? Have you ever asked, “What would love do?” in contemplating choices? Think of something simple you are choosing and ask the question now. What would love do?

Eventually, those who survive the pandemic will find themselves shaping a new version of the world. Will anyone be asking, “What is the loving thing to do?” Or will the wide path of not caring and doing what is destructive but familiar be clogged with unconscious people. Will the world be better after the disruption and opportunity to reassess the path we choose?

Honestly, I don't think we can make a promise to someone else or the world without making a promise to ourselves. Promises based on loving ourselves are just as essential as promises based on loving God and others. Maybe the only vow, sacred and holy, that we need to make is the vow to continue to ask, “What would love do?” And a follow-up vow to listen and act upon the answer.