

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“NEW BEGINNINGS”
John 1:1-18
January 4, 2009
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services**

Welcome on this first Sunday of the New Year. New Year's Day is the one holiday that is almost universal. It is the world's most observed holiday. I trust you've made your New Year's resolutions--one of which is to be in worship each week. Well at least you are here for this first Sunday.

Resolutions are good, especially if there are changes we need to make in our lives. I heard about one poor guy who dialed his girlfriend and got the following recording: **“I am not available right now, but thank you for caring enough to call. I am making some changes in my life. Please leave a message after the beep. If I do not return your call, you are one of the changes.”** (1)

It's good to make changes, for the most part. As we are often reminded by our critics, our spouses or our children, none of us is perfect. In fact, some of us might have some deep regrets about the way we've lived our lives.

We could all write our regrets on a piece of paper and bring them to the altar and watch them go up in smoke as we did at a former church. That might even be very therapeutic for some of us as we begin a new year. But our text for the day from the prologue to the Gospel of John puts the emphasis not on our past, but on our future. Not on our regrets, but on our possibilities. Listen to this scripture again:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made . . . He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

What a positive theme for this New Year! The prologue to John is focused not on what we have been, or even what we are now. Rather it focuses on what we can yet be: ***“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God . . .”***

I would venture to say that what you really want as you begin this New Year is to know deep in your heart that you can be more than you are today; that you have a right to become a child of God. Isn’t that what you really want; to know that you can live the next 365 days confidently aware that your life matters; to know that God is with you and that you can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens you? ***“To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”***

We all have unrealized potential. That’s the first thing these words say to me. We are children of the dust who have the potential to be children of the Divine. When each of us came into this world, we brought with us an amazing amount of potential.

Tony Buzan in his book ***The Power of Verbal Intelligence*** gives us a wonderful example of the potential each of us brought into the world. He tells the story of the origins of the Suzuki method that has helped millions of children learn to play the violin. It begins with a Japanese teacher, musician and instrument maker named, of course, Suzuki. Suzuki had two moments

in his life when he gained life-changing insights.

Suzuki's first revelation came when he was visiting a building that served as a giant incubator for thousands of Japanese songbirds known as larks. The breeders of these larks take literally thousands of eggs and incubate them in giant, warm, silent halls that act as a gigantic nest. There is only one sound that the tiny songbirds hear as they break through the shells of their eggs. It is the sound of another lark, a very special adult lark that is chosen because of its singing ability. Suzuki noticed to his amazement that every little chick that hatched automatically began to copy the master singer lark. Even more remarkable, after a few days he observed that each chick, having started out by purely copying songs, began to develop its own variations on the original Master Song. The breeders wait until the chick musicians have developed their own styles, and then select from them the next Master Singer, and so the process continues.

“Astounding!” thought Suzuki. **“If a bird’s tiny, tiny brain can learn so perfectly, then surely the human brain, with its vastly superior abilities, should be able to do the same and better!”** This line of reasoning led Suzuki to his next revelation--every Japanese child learns to speak Japanese! When Suzuki pointed this out to his friends they laughed and assured him they already knew that. **“But No! No!”** declared Suzuki, **“they really do, and it’s amazing!”**

“Suzuki was correct,” says Tony Buzan. **“Like Newton before him, he had discovered something that was so obvious no one could see it--that any baby, born in any country, automatically learns, within two years, the language of that country. This means that every normal baby’s brain is capable of learning millions of potential languages.”** (2)

Think about that a few moments and you will realize what an amazing thing that is. Given the proper environment, the human creature is capable of acquiring an amazing amount of information and skills in a short time. It is truly sad that so much of this potential is neglected. By the way, parents should not give up on a child who seems lacking in potential. Albert

Einstein couldn't speak fluently even when he was nine years old. His parents actually thought he might be mentally challenged. Children develop differently and children are gifted in different ways. You and I came into this world having enormous mental and physical potential, much of which is never realized.

There is something more our text is saying to us this morning. **We also have enormous untapped spiritual potential.** Now this is a concept that many of us will not so easily grasp, but it is so vitally important. Notice, the text doesn't say that Christ came into the world so that we can improve our I.Q. or that we will be able to run the 440 in record time. It says that whoever receives Christ and believes on his name has the potential to become a child of God. But what does that mean? It means that you and I have the potential to be like Christ. We have a potential within our hearts and souls for peace, a potential for joy, a potential for hope, a potential for love, a potential for forgiveness that is greater than we can possibly imagine.

Try to grasp the significance of that truth. We no longer have to live lives filled with inner conflict, anger, resentment, fear, hatred, guilt or rejection. By the power of God's Holy Spirit we can become new people, God's people. Sometimes this happens to people in a dramatic way as it did to the Apostle Paul.

Some changes can occur quite dramatically. Sometimes it happens very slowly over time. But you and I can be more than we are. And it doesn't depend on our background; it doesn't depend on our physical or mental limitations. It doesn't depend on our age. Many older people may find themselves slowing down physically, and sometimes even mentally. But there need be no slowdown in our ability to be children of God. This is a gift that never fades nor ever fails.

And it is a gift. **The right to be children of God is not something we earn. It is a gift from a loving, merciful God. "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he GAVE the right to become children of God."**

It's not a matter of how often we come to God's house, it's not how often we read our Bibles, and it's not how often we pray. We don't earn the right to be children of God. It is a gift. ***"To all who received him, who believed in his name, [Christ] gave the right to become children of God."***

Who is the person your child might grow into, the human being he or she might become? Don't allow your potential greatness to go unrealized. Fulfill the promise of your life as you unleash the splendor that has imprisoned your potential.

God has placed within each of us enormous potential, mental potential, physical potential, but the greatest of all is spiritual potential, the potential to become children of God.

I invite you begin this New Year with the realization that you are an heir to the throne, not because of anything you have done, but because of what Christ has done in your behalf. You have enormous potential--physically and mentally. You have even greater potential spiritually. You have the right to become a child of God, and, indeed, by your baptism, you are a child of God. That's something powerful to live up to. The right to live like Christ, the right to have God as our Father, our Counselor, our Guide.

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.”

Go forth into this New Year aware of who you are, and to Whom you belong. I would love to be your pastor in 2009. I would love for this to be your church.

1. Source unknown.

2. Michael J. Gleb and Tony Buzan, *Lessons From the Art of Juggling* (New York: Harmony Books, 1992).