

With You I Am Well Pleased  
Matthew 3:13-17

How many of you made New Year's Resolutions 12 days ago? How many have kept them these first 12 days 2020? Have you missed a day of exercise yet? Have you stuck to your diet? Are you texting less, talking more, always telling the truth?

Most "resolutions" people make are self-directed: get thinner, work smarter, read more, get stronger, take control of your life. We want to make changes that will help us, improve us, and bring us good feelings about ourselves.

Jesus said to be "in" the world but not to be "of" the world. What if, instead of resolutions to live in 2020 in ways that make us feel good about ourselves and bring us pleasure, what if we resolve to live a life that brings pleasure to God.

What if we were to put aside our little resolutions and resolve to actually do something? What if we were to resolve to so live in 2020 that by this time next year God can look back at our year of living and declare — "This is my Son, my daughter, whom I love. With you I am well pleased." Could there be any greater joy than hearing those words?

Remember how as a child you lived for and loved to get the approval of your Mom and Dad? Piano recitals, school plays, science projects, Christmas and Easter pageants — all were at the same time fearful and fun. But for you to feel like you'd really accomplished something, it took a parent, one of your grands or that "special someone," watching and cheering, applauding and effusing "great job," "well done," "bravo," "I'm so proud and pleased." Or even just an "I love you."

If the praise of our imperfect human parents could bring such a sense of satisfaction to our childish hearts, how much more the affirmation of our perfect, all powerful, heavenly father would mean to our life. The absolute best thing we can ever know in life is that we have lived in such a way that it brings God great pleasure.

But there's a flip side. There's always a flip side. If you fail in your New Year's resolutions what are the consequences? You lose five pounds instead of twenty. You still sneak a cigarette. You take the elevator instead of the stairs. Your closets aren't cleaned out and you still don't get your taxes done until April 14.

It's easy to appease yourself for these failures. At least you lost five pounds. There is probably lots of good stuff in your closet you can still use. We wouldn't want to give the government its due until the last minute anyway.

But what happens if the life you lead in 2020 fails to live up to God's expectations? In Hebrews 10:38-39 the consequences are spelled out in stark terms. "My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back."

As wonderful as it would be to hear God say one day, "I've tracked your life and ministry. With you I am well pleased," so horrifying and devastating it would be to hear God say, "I've tracked your life and ministry. I take no pleasure in you."

Of course, the paradox of our saint/sinner status is that all of us fall short of pleasing God, but that God's grace covers our failures. In other words, each one of us hears two conflicting things at the same time: "You have failed me. And yet you are perfect."

Truth be told, far more of us are people pleasers rather than God pleasers. And we have it all wrong. We were not created to please people; we were given this gift of life to please God.

In today's gospel text we read about Jesus as he left Galilee and walked toward the wilderness around Perea to find his shirt-tail relative, a crazy man baptizing people in the chilly Jordan.

John's mission of baptism was a symbolic gesture of repentance and the baptized person's welcome into a new life of radical obedience to God. Jesus approached John with no sins to repent of and no need of John's baptism. Yet he knew that baptism was the first step he needed to make as he embarked on his ministry.

Do you sense how appalled John was by Jesus request? John the Baptizer balked and back-pedaled. He recognized the one who stood before him as the very one he had promised and proclaimed. But he also knew that both he and Jesus lived according to God's directions — not their own. And that both he and Jesus sought one thing above all else: to please God.

So Jesus assured John that it was "the right thing to do." That John should baptize Jesus because that was providentially designed. That John's baptism of Jesus wasn't a symbol of his superiority to Jesus. That God wanted Jesus to come to John to connect the dots between Proclaimer and the Proclaimed; to capstone John's mission so as to commence Jesus' ministry.

Both Jesus and John acted according to God's will and stood in God's good pleasure. Baptizing Jesus was outside John's "comfort zone." But he bent his will to Jesus' purpose and power and agreed to do what Jesus declared was to "fulfill all righteousness."

What weird and wonderful things might God call you to do in 2020 in order to "fulfill all righteousness"? What actions and attitudes do you need to "resolve" in order to be the recipient of God's pleasure? Here are three "resolves" for 2020 if we desire to hear these words: "with you I am well pleased."

**Resolve #1: Please God.** The first resolve is to actively seek God's praise and pleasure — not the approval and praise of people. We all know "people pleasers" — those who will do almost anything to be stroked and praised by others. People pleasers will turn themselves inside/out, promise anything, complain never, in order to win the approval, gain the applause, receive the end-of-the-month bonus. No matter what it takes, no matter what they have to do, it's all worth it to win the approval of others.

People pleasers might seem to be pleasing others, but they are really only pleasing themselves. They're not pleasing their sense of right and wrong. They're not pleasing the works of righteousness in this world. They're not pleasing the truth of faith and the cause of justice.

They're just "going along to get along," getting along to get ahead - professionally, financially, or personally. "People-pleasing" encourages us to avoid the glare from heaven and keep our eyes pointed downward to earth, focused on the bottom line, fixated on the most accessible and easy.

Let's live 2020 as a "God pleaser" which urges us to look upward and forward rather than downward and behind. You'll not only take a shot at changing the world by being a God-pleaser instead of people-pleasing, but you'll change yourself, too.

**Resolve #2: Look for road signs of righteousness.**

Jesus set out from Galilee and plodded through the wilderness to Perea to find John because he clearly perceived road signs that said "God's will, this way." For those of us

who follow Christ there's a prayer each of us should utter at the start of every new endeavor: "Oh God, make a dead-end street at every turn that does not lead to you."

Dead-ends are not endings. Dead-ends are the places where you turn around, do an about face, reconsider, re-adjust, and start again. The difference between a "dead-end" and a "fresh start" is all in your attitude. If we're convinced that Jesus is guiding our steps, leading us down a path that pleases God, then our reaction to "dead-ends" should be "thank you Jesus," rather than "why me?", "why now?", "not again."

If we make our primary goal in life to "Please God," then we should pray that at every fork in the road, at every turn in our life, we'll walk towards Christ not away from him.

If this year is like every other year, there will certainly be some really bad roads that end in big fat failures. Sinkholes and washouts, the deadest of ends. But these are not endings as much as turn-around zones designed by God to give us the opportunity to go back and find the road we missed. The road back to Jesus is never out of range no matter how many wrong turns we've taken.

### Resolve #3: **Bear the cross.**

In a world where everyone likes to wear a cross, 2020 could be the year we resolve to bear the cross rather than just wear the cross. Not pleasing everyone; taking the road less traveled: these are God-delighting decisions. But there are times where we must sacrifice something of ourselves in order to embrace the love of Christ.

At every moment in his ministry, gospel writers described Jesus' cross-bearing obedience of sacrifice and suffering: Jesus was obedient; Jesus was God's servant; Jesus was the Beloved; Jesus was the Son; Jesus was sacrificed.

It took the power of the cross to erase the power of sin. It took the sacrifice of One to bring about redemption for all.

Jesus hiked out in the wilderness to see his crazy grasshopper-crunching, hair-shirted cousin John because he was obedient to God. He hung on the cross of a petty Roman bureaucrat in order to fulfill God's plan for human redemption. He spent a lifetime associating with the "wrong" people, preaching a "wrong" message, healing on the "wrong" day, encouraging righteous behavior that was "wrong". All so that the right thing could be done for God's right-eous people.

In everything Jesus said and did throughout his ministry, the illogic and unconsidered consequences of the cross played the decisive role. Let's make 2020 the year when Christians stopped wearing the cross and started bearing the cross

Let's stop bending over backwards to please people and instead bend our knees to please God. Let's make actual sacrifices that have life shattering consequences - to quit doing things that exploit others; to end relationships that hurt ourselves, our families and our friends; to welcome the least desired; to give to those we deem unworthy.

They might not be nails. But each of those actions is a heavy cross to bear. And we bear the cross because we need the cross to get across 2020. All out of our love for Christ and our desire to live a Jesus kind of life, so that we might receive the greatest gift we could ever envision - hearing deep in our souls the voice that proclaims, "with you I am well pleased!"