

Title: Thanksgiving Sunday  
Text: Various  
Date: 24 November, 2013  
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron

This week the Oxford Dictionary named their word of the year, the word whose usage had increased the most. And Oxford's 'word of the year' is – drum roll please - 'selfie'. Do you know what a 'selfie' is? Here's the definition according to Oxford:

Selfie (noun) a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a Smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.

Selfie was word of the year because its online usage increased an phenomenal 17,000 percent over the last 12 months.

Just to make you really proud to be an Australian, the word selfie was first used in 2002 by a young man who fell over and damaged his lip on a drunken night out and then posted a photo of it online.

Here's the really scary thing; it's estimated that 30% of all photos young people take are 'selfies.' Selfie is a word that has its origin in today's social media obsessed, narcissistic and yet so insecure youth culture. Runner up to selfie as word of the year was twerking, a phrase that describes a particular form of sexually provocative dancing. I'm not going to put up any photos of twerking. What does it say about our culture, especially youth culture, when selfie and twerking are our words of the year?

The same week that selfie is named as Oxford's word of the year, 30,000 schoolies descend on Surfers and we celebrate that arrest rates are down on previous years, even though they still number in the hundreds. Again this week, reports are released that one in eight deaths of young people can be directly attributed to alcohol. One in eight.

Selfies, twerking, rampant binge drinking – what is happening with our young people? One person made this observation:

Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers.

Anyone want to say 'amen' to that? Here's the thing; this observation wasn't made this year, but actually two and a half thousand years ago by a man called Socrates. It's easy to be a grumpy old man or woman and lay into 'young people today', and while there is plenty to lament and be concerned about, there is also so much to celebrate.

You see, the same week that 'selfie' was named as word of the year, six of our young adults returned from two weeks in Poipet, Cambodia where they served children in a slum community – all of those children whose education is being sponsored by our young adult community. This same week, eight of our youth leaders have given up their time and sleep to serve with hundreds of other leaders as Red frog chaplains at schoolies. This year, dozens of young people have trusted their lives to Jesus for the first time. Thirty two made that decision in one night at Youthstreet, our high school aged ministry. This year our Kidzlife, MAD, Youthstreet and 12two young adult communities have all grown significantly in numbers and influence.

In a selfie obsessed, twerking and alcohol soaked culture, the motto of our Youthstreet high school ministry is:

A revolution by Jesus, for Jesus.

As I look back over 2013 and celebrate what God has done in our midst, right near the top of the list is what God is doing amongst our young people. I love the fact that here at Newlife we are one, big, happy – sometimes dysfunctional family. I love the fact that this year two of our members, Myra and Muriel, celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> birthdays. But I love, love, love the

fact that every week this year around 500 children, youth and young adults gather in one of our communities at Newlife to be caught up in a revolution by Jesus, for Jesus.

Next week we begin advent, the season leading up to Christmas as we celebrate the first coming of Jesus and anticipate his second coming. Today we take a few moments to look back over the year that has been a celebration of what God has done and remind ourselves of that God has taught us.

This week we asked on our church's Facebook page what people were thankful for, celebrated and had learned as they looked back over 2013. This is what some people wrote:

That I know God better, deeper and more intimately. He has carried me through my darkest year and I am okay.

Definitely a deeper understanding of how good grace really is and finding satisfaction in Jesus and the gospel.

That my faith continues to grow, the reward of being part of Time to Build and the blessings of being a part of our Newlife family.

Thankful that we have survived a rough year and that God has always provided on an "Only God" way.

As you look back over 2013, what is one word that describes or summarizes your year? To give you an example, mine would be 'intense'. What would yours be? Don't over think it. Now, share it with your neighbour...

There is so much we can look back and celebrate – the things God has done in our midst. We have grown. We have been ever more generous. We have seen so many people come to faith. We have heard testimony after testimony of God's transforming grace. Despite our unfaithfulness, God has been faithful. It has been an 'Only God' year in so many ways.

We can look back and celebrate what God has done and we can look back and celebrate and remember what God has taught us.

The man looked a little worried when the doctor came in to administer his annual physical, so the first thing the doctor did was to ask whether anything was troubling him.

"Well, to tell the truth, Doc, yes," answered the patient. "You see, I seem to be getting forgetful. I'm never sure I can remember where I put the car, or whether I answered a letter, or where I'm going, or what it is I'm going to do once I get there -- if I get there. So, I really need your help. What can I do?"

The doctor mused for a moment, and then answered in his kindest tone, "Pay me in advance."

The truth about you and me is that we are forgetful people. God teaches us things we have to re-learn again and again. The bible is constantly telling God's people to 'remember'. The last couple of weeks we have been remembering the heart of the gospel story; that while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Christ died for us – and that through his death and resurrection we can enjoy eternal life with God. The Apostle Peter writes to one of the churches he leads as he reminds them of the core of the gospel message:

I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory.

(1 Peter 1:12-13)

More perhaps needing fresh revelation from God, or learning some new truth, what we most need is to be reminded of what God has already taught us?

Perhaps more than a fresh revelation we need a refreshed memory. So in the time I have left, let's do some remembering together.

This year God has been reminding us of the beauty and wonder and mystery of the church. We explored various biblical metaphors for the church.

In Christ, the church is a new family – one, big, happy sometimes dysfunctional family whose common identity is not found in our shared DNA but in the blood of Jesus Christ.

In Christ, the church not an inanimate building, but a spiritual house made up of living stones:

The church is a Spiritual House shaped and formed by Christ the Cornerstone,  
that finds its life in Christ the Living Stone,  
and which is complete only in Christ the Capstone.

We remembered that in Christ, we are a Royal Priesthood made up of Princely Servants whose life is found in, modeled on and empowered by the Servant King.

We remembered that in Christ, the church is a City of Refuge. We learned that:

Whoever, whenever, no matter whatever – can find eternal refuge in and through Jesus.

And that all the church that has to offer that is of any worth is Jesus and the refuge he offers.

I hope that as we leave 2013 we all remember what a beautiful, wonderful gift the church is. I hope we remember and celebrate that as we have building new facilities, God by his grace has been building us.

This year God has also been reminding us of the beauty and wonder of the gospel of grace.

It takes a moment to experience grace and a lifetime to understand it

For seven weeks we spent all of our time in one chapter of the bible, but what a chapter it is – Romans, chapter 8.

Romans chapter 8 begins with a fantastic promise:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.  
(Romans 8:1)

The Apostle Paul is laying before us the glorious promise that if we place our faith and trust in Jesus and what he accomplished for us in his death and resurrection, we are free from the curse and condemnation of our sin.

Romans 8 begins with a wonderful promise and it ends with another:

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
(Romans 8:38-39)

The promise of Romans 8:1 is that when we place our faith and trust in Jesus we are justified – we are made right with God. The promise of Romans 8:38-39 is that in Christ one day we will be glorified – that his victory over death is our victory, that his inheritance is our inheritance. In between our justification and our glorification is our sanctification – the process by which the Spirit of God transforms us to become more like Jesus. Romans 8 is full of promises, none more radical than that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us.

We don't run the race to earn God's favor; we run the race *in the power of God's favor*.

The victory we live is not one we experience in the future, but in the here and now. It's a victory that delivers us not necessarily from tough circumstances, but delivers us through them.

Throughout our journey into Romans 8 we had this little book I wrote to assist us. It has daily reflections on each of the 39 verses of Romans 8. We have plenty of copies left, and if you don't have one, or would like to give a copy to a friend, pick one up in the foyer after the service.

This year we have learned about the beauty and wonder and mystery of the church and of the gospel of grace. Last, we have also learned about the beauty and wonder and mystery of the presence of God.

Perhaps conscious of the challenges the year would bring, but also feeling a sense of disquiet in my own spirit, I entered 2013 with one resolve – one New Year's resolution if you like, which I shared with you way back on January 16. It was simply this:

In 2013 I resolve to live more fully in the presence of God.

Now we believe, and the bible testifies, that God is omnipresent – that is present everywhere. As David cries out in Psalm 139, 'Where can I flee from your presence?'

God is present everywhere, but that presence isn't always obvious to us. In fact, there are seasons in our life where we feel his apparent absence more than his manifest, tangible presence. God is present everywhere, but not every person experiences his close, personal and intimate presence.

It was the very real possibility that, in response to Israel's defiant idolatry, God would withdraw his close, personal and intimate presence from Israel that terrified Moses. In response to Moses' desperate plea for God not to abandon Israel, this is what we read:

The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?"  
(Exodus 33:14-15)

We discovered that in the presence of God there is kindness, invitation, joy, sustenance, forgiveness and healing and intimacy. But perhaps more than anything else, and first, in the presence of God there is rest – soul deep rest.

We explored the story of Mary and Martha. Mary was the doer, serving Jesus frantically, while Martha simply sat at his feet drinking in his presence. Against our expectations, it's Martha, not Mary that Jesus commends for doing the 'one thing necessary.' Through Mary and Martha's story we discovered that God wants us to:

Stop: Rest in God  
Sit Down: Commune with God  
Shut Up: Hear from God.

As we stop, sit down and shut up like Martha, we do the one thing that God says is necessary – we fall at the feet of Jesus and simply enjoy rest in his presence. In the presence of God there is rest – soul satisfying rest.

Here's where it gets personal. At the beginning of the year I shared with you my resolve to live more fully in the presence of God, and by extension, to enjoy God's rest. As 2013 draws to a close I have been reflecting on how well I have lived that resolve, and the answer is not good – in fact, pretty terrible. I entered 2013 tired – physically, emotionally and spiritually – and to be honest, I am leaving the year the same way.

In 2013 I have been more of a Mary – busy doing stuff for God too often ignoring the one thing necessary – simply enjoy and press in to the presence of God. This last week I was reading an article when an observation smacked me right between the eyes. The author said this:

Many church leaders unknowingly replace the transcendent vitality of a life with God for the ego satisfaction they derive from a life for God.”  
(Skye Jethani)

Too often this year I have been living a life for God, rather than a life with God. There is so, so much difference. And so I am suffering a self-inflicted malady – I am spiritually worn out. And I don't think I am the only one.

Four or five mornings a week I head to the gym; you don't get an impressive physique like this without working out. I get on the treadmill and I run. I run and run and run, but here's the thing; funnily enough I never get anywhere. I just get hot and sweaty and breathless. Recently I've stepped it up a bit. The machine I use has a motor that adjusts the incline up and down- so now I am running hard and uphill. It's such hard work it has to be good for me.

It's too easy for me to take a treadmill approach to my life with God; run hard, fill my life with activity – doing, doing, doing thing for God, while all the time ignoring the one thing that Jesus says is necessary – to discover rest in his presence.

In Genesis God creates humanity on the sixth day. On the seventh day, God rests. Adam and Eve's first day on the planet was a Sabbath; a day they observed God rest, and presumably, participated in that rest. On the next day their work began, as they named the animals and tended God's garden. But before they worked, before they served – they rested.

As it was for Adam and Eve, so it should be for us. There is a rhythm to our working and resting woven by God into creation; we rest before we work. In fact, we work out of our rest.

Before we breathe out...we breathe in.

The rest that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden was lost when they sinned. Work that had been fulfilling was now sweaty toil, painful, tiring and never ending. The rest – the peace – the shalom - that Adam and Eve had enjoyed with God was lost.

History tells the story of man's desperate attempts to rediscover the Rest we lost in the Garden. But it what was lost was never found – not fully.

But then Jesus comes and says this as recorded in Matthew's gospel:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.  
(Matthew 11:28-29)

The rest we lost in the Garden of Eden, Jesus offers us through the Garden of Gethsemane.

Before we work, we rest – we rest in the work that only Jesus could do; the work he accomplished on the Cross.

And so before we breathe out we breathe in – we breathe in grace. Before we can truly give, we first must receive.

A couple of weeks ago I was channel surfing and I caught the tail end of a documentary about a rehabilitation program for injured returned service men and women. All had suffered injuries of some sort. The program was a long distance sea kayaking adventure where the participants regained their confidence to overcome mental and physical scars. It was inspiring stuff. And then they showed some footage of participants kayaking. And I was shocked. Not only were the kayaks being paddled, they also had a small sail. My immediate and first thought was, 'That's cheating!'

And then I heard through my spiritual tiredness God whisper to my weary soul, 'Stuart, why don't you stop rowing and start resting. Hoist you sail and catch the wind of my spirit.'