

Oops

“Keep working at it.”

1 John 1:5-9

Rev. John H. Hice
February 6, 2011
First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Liars

I got a call from a friend who lives on the West Coast. He wondered how we were doing in the “storm of the century” we were supposed to be having and what I was doing during the storm. I told him I was working on a sermon called *Oops*, about what to do when you’ve botched your resolution, the last of a series on resolutions – following through with your best intentions.

Mike told me that I was a little late: by this time everyone already broke their promises and life was back to normal.

I thought I’d impress him a little with my research; so I told him the statistics: 45% of us actually make a resolution on any given year. After the first week, 75% of those who made resolutions still hang in with them. And after 6 months 45% of resolution-makers are still keeping the promises they made to themselves.¹ So: there.

He said to me, “They’re all lying.”

Would they do that? Maybe. A study done by an assistant professor at the University of Texas concluded that there’s a world-wide tendency for people to describe themselves in a more favorable light than either their thoughts or actions. He called it *socially desirable responding*. People give less-than-honest answers to questions on surveys asking about behaviors that relate to materialism, compulsive buying, drug and alcohol addiction, smoking, shoplifting, gambling, prostitution, and intolerant attitudes.²

Wide-spread deception goes on when people represent themselves to others. Even on surveys. The professor said he found respondents weren’t even conscious they were lying. Does that mean they were even being dishonest to themselves? Do you think they might even be trying to deceive God?

Think of Adam and Eve after they ate the forbidden fruit. God was coming and something told them they had become less than they were supposed to be, so they made clothing out of with fig leaves and hid in the bushes. More than anything, it was one of those Bible scenes in which we are supposed to recognize...ourselves.

Honest, and the Art of Starting Over

Maybe Mike was right. Maybe it's not 75% that made it through the first week, resolution in tact; and maybe it's more like 5% who make it into the seventh month instead of 45. Woe is us!

It's hard to face the truth when truth is: you and I have fallen short.

Maybe that's why one splurge ends up ruining the whole diet and why one day or one week of missed exercise so often means the abandonment of the whole routine. And maybe that's all about disappointment. You know how a mistake can turn into a failure and shame can turn a good intention into final defeat. What did we say? – "Quitting is easy; I've done it hundreds of times."

Hmm...if it's anything, Christian Faith is supposed to be practical. If it's worth it, it's worth applying to every day life as well as what happens to us ultimately. So it may very well be that believing in Jesus has something to do with you when you botch your resolution.

There's a doctrine for it: the doctrine of forgiveness. Jesus was applying it all the time. One of the last things he said was: "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

A lame man was brought by friends who tore apart a roof and lowered him into a crowded room in order to get him to Jesus. The first thing Jesus told him was "Your sins are forgiven," like his mistakes were doing more to keep him from moving forward than his inability to walk.

A woman came to Jesus and started cleaning his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair when he was eating at an important person's house. And he forgave her, explaining to the grossed-out host that those who are forgiven much love much.

Now the writer of I John tells us: each of us sin. That's another way of saying that we botch our resolutions. He says it in a way that suggests that maybe we shouldn't be surprised and maybe we shouldn't even be ashamed that we fall short sometimes.

Even a lot of times.

What we should be careful about, though, is pretending that we don't botch it. *If we say we don't sin*: he calls that *walking in the darkness*.

Walking in the darkness is living without integrity.³ It's not the 55% who admit that they failed to keep their resolution after six months that are walking in darkness. It's the part of the other 45% so-called successful people who say they're on top of their game but are really just talking a good story. *They're the ones walking in darkness.*

Away from the light of God.

You might think a cover-up makes you look good. But at the end of the day, who cares what you look like if it's dark?

The writer of John says honesty with God and with yourself gets you walking in the light whether or not you ate forbidden fruit or used the credit card for something you said you wouldn't. "If you walk in the light as he himself is in the light, you have fellowship..." Fellowship with him and fellowship with each other. With that kind of connection, his faithfulness comes through with the kind of forgiveness that cleanses you of the sin.

So instead of using up your energy in a personal cover-up, Christ gets you up from where you've fallen, dusts you off as you say, "Oops," and gives you a do-over.

What if when you got to that six-month mark, keeping your resolution doesn't mean *I still haven't botched it*, but instead means *I'm still working on it*?

Living in Truth

That's what coming to this table for the Lord's Supper can mean. It doesn't matter whether you're in the 64% who made it through the first month⁴: you're still invited to Sunday dinner.

So come in. Enjoy the fellowship of sinners and resolution-breakers who know they still belong to Jesus. Enjoy the freedom of abandoned pretensions and facades of perfection that are all so exhausting to keep up. Celebrate the gift of constant do-over's that God let's you keep having every time you say, "Oops."

Because this table is home. And at home, they'll always leave the light on for you.

¹ Statistics gathered by Proactive Change, 119 W 57th St., New York City, New York 10019 (©) <http://www.proactivechange.com/resolutions/statistics.htm>

² "Vanity makes people lie in surveys," The Times of India. February 26, 2009. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Vanity-makes-people-lie-in-surveys/rssarticleshow/4195798.cms>

³ C. Clifton Black, "The First, Second, and Third Letters of John," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. XII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1998. p 386

⁴ Ibid., *Statistics*