

Date Preached	04-Sept-2022	Date Initiated	16-Aug-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Proper 18, Yr C

" 'I will change my mind,' [says the LORD]. "



There is a widely known and widely quoted saying—and I'll leave aside the endless Internet debates about who *actually* said it!—that goes something like, "The definition of insanity" —that is, 'foolishness' or 'stubbornness' and not actual mental illness—"is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Now, at least as a *trope*, this rings true. Whether we flip a wall switch on-and-off eight or nine times, convinced that *one* of these times the light is *bound* to come on ... or send our neighbor email-after-email, asking him to *please* not blast his music after 10 PM ... endless repetition of a futile act will always yield fruitless results.

But I think the current vogue of this saying is overdone. For how often do we literally do the *exact same* thing over and over again? Most of the time, I think, we are more like experimenting scientists or tinkering mechanics. If I make a new dish and it's not as tasty as I thought it would be, I may tweak the spicing or cooking method, to see if that improves things. When, while I was at work, the dog smuggled away the coaster from beside my reading chair in my study three days-in-a-row, I found a new place to leave it that was out of his reach but still within mine.

Starting over again is a normal, natural part of life. Yes, some problems we can never fix ... some ruptures are incapable of repair. But, in the main, our innate human resilience—our desire for positive outcomes, ↓ tempered by the pragmatics' of actually *achieving* them—is a virtue. When resources are low, we find a way to get more ... or make do with less. When we're on the outs with a family member or friend or co-worker, we may take the blame or say "I'm sorry" to get things right again.

And we're resilient in our faith, as well, for it surely enjoys no exemption from failure and disappointment. ¶Sometimes, I read and read, thirsting for some pithy theological thought or deep spiritual insight; and come up with nothing satisfying. ¶I promise myself to be more attentive to the needs of others ... to care more for friend and stranger, as Jesus teaches us; and day after day, I tote up **opportunities missed** and **priorities disordered**. ¶I pray—sometime *hard*—for certain outcomes ... for a cure, for the relief of suffering, for reconciliation ... only to realize, eventually, that my hope will bear no fruit.

And so, I start over. ¶I stop looking for the answer in a book ... and meditate in my question in my heart. ¶Instead of cursing my short-sighted, self-oriented tendencies, I consciously try to widen my perspective and slow down my pace. ¶I come to understand the specific result I've been praying for may not be possible, but there may be *other* pathways ↓ to the same grace. And with renewed hope, I start my prayers over again.

** ** *

Now, you may be wondering how I meandered onto this topic. What in our rather disparate readings for today got me thinking about the resiliency of faith? Well, as I reflected on them, as a set,ⁱⁱ it began to dawn on me: Each of them **is**, in its own way, a word about *starting over again, in faith*. ¶The prophet Jeremiah proclaims God's message to the people of Judah that it's not too late to repent ... that there's still time for them to start over again and be molded into the ways of God.

¶Saint Paul writes to his friend Philemon, entreating him to accept a wayward slave not merely back into Philemon's household, but also into his heart, as a brother in Christ. ¶And Jesus, in the middle of His own long journey to Jerusalem, admonishes that because faith carries costs, we may need to start over again and again.

Stitched loosely together ... read in harmony with each other ... these lessons offer important perspectives on starting over again when we get frustrated or stuck in our faith.

- First, sometimes starting over again entails *sacrifice*. Jesus' words to the crowds swarming about Him about "hating" one's mother and father, spouse and children ... about giving up "all []our possessions" ... in order to follow His teachings is, to be sure, rhetorical hyperbole—not His literal meaning.ⁱⁱⁱ But *directionally*, His point stands, nonetheless: Sometimes, starting again or afresh in our walk of faith requires giving up something we hold dear. Maybe we need to devote more time ... or give away more money ... than we'd originally set aside. Maybe we need to reevaluate some deeply held opinions, whether about issues or about others. Maybe the pursuit of a certain pleasure in our lives has morphed into too much of a good thing and needs to be pruned back.
> When our faith becomes stuck, it's always good to ask whether there's something '*sticking*' it.
- Second, in order to start over, it may help to consider our situation *through Jesus' eyes*. Paul's friend Philemon has been aggrieved or injured, in some way, by Onesimus, his slave.^{iv} In the culture of his day, Philemon has the right to insist on restitution: to make Onesimus pay—maybe dearly—for his wrongs. But Paul urges Philemon to start over again: to regard Onesimus as Jesus would, as "a beloved brother"; to graciously afford him the forgiveness and dignity, mercy and love of Christ.
> When, in faith, we confront an intractable problem or a vexing decision, pondering how Jesus would act may help us start over, more fruitfully.
- Finally, we should never forget that when we do start over again, God starts over *with us*. You are clay in the My hands, God tells us, through Jeremiah. I keep working and working and working you upon My wheel. Sometimes the clay spoils, and I need to start over again. But, oh! When you take My word to heart ... when you seek to do My will in this world ... how I mold and shape and sculpt you into a vessel as beautiful as you are faithful!
> Whenever—and however—we start over again in faith ... changing our hearts ... confronting our preferences and prejudices ... surrendering still more of our lives to God ... Christ takes us into His hands and works us, anew, more and more into His likeness.

** ** *

God-the-potter-at-the-wheel *is* the resiliency of our faith ... our starting over and over and over again in belief ... in giving ... in service. Always deftly and patiently shaping us, the Potter never abandons, leaves or gives up on us ... but waits for the clay of our souls to take on the shape of grace.

The world may say that all of our trying and trying and trying yet again is "insane." But we know that every time we do, we are, in fact, simply starting over again, in faith ... in the eternal, loving hands of God.



The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT

ⁱ I think I've coined a new use of this word! (It just seemed to fit.)

ⁱⁱ Standard (and good!) homiletical wisdom is to choose *one* of the three readings appointed for a Sunday and focus mainly on that. Most weeks, this is what I do. Today, perhaps, is the exception that proves the rule?

ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, many of His teachings—and most especially, the parables He tells—are overstated in order that we not miss the point; and also, at least in my opinion, that we not forget the divine perfection He embodies; *viz.*, the limited and contingent nature of our human faculties means that we're constantly compromising the realization of the good—of the Good News—of Jesus in our own lives; but He Himself is subject to no such limitations: In Him, the Good News is *entirely* good, *all* of the time!

^{iv} Neither occasion nor time permit me to address the relationship of Paul specifically, or of the New Testament (including the four Gospels) more generally, with the social institution of slavery. In the immediate context of our reading of the Book of Philemon, I point out that Paul both (i) expressly asks Philemon, the owner, to treat Onesimus, the slave, as an equal—as a "beloved brother"—and this, implicitly at least, calls into question whether the institution of slavery can be reconciled with Jesus' teachings; and (ii) models (at least until his resort, in v 21, to "obedience") a suppression of his own authority to command Philemon (v 8) in favor of an appeal to his acting in love (v 9)—again, an implicit rejection of one's imposition of will and enforcement of action against another.

More broadly, it is helpful, although hardly dispositive, to note three things. *First*, under the Roman institution of slavery, servitude arose not from immutable conditions such as race or ethnicity but from exigencies such as being captured in wartime; selling oneself due to indebtedness; or even being kidnapped. This in no way excuses or justifies Roman slavery, but it does distinguish it from the racist caste-system of chattel slavery practiced many centuries later in the Americas. *Second*, Roman household slaves were often educated and placed in positions of managerial authority and respect. They could own property and generally had a reasonable expectation of being manumitted in middle adulthood (when, if owned by Roman citizens, they became citizens, as well). *Third*, Paul's staunch belief was that Jesus would return and bring about the end of all things (the "eschaton," in theological parlance) within the lifetimes of those who had known Him on earth. Given this, Paul may have chosen not to address the injustices of slavery in order to devote himself to preparing members of the churches he'd founded for the eschaton. In a similar vein, Paul may have chosen not to take on an institution so core to the Roman way of life (some estimates are that 35% of the Empire's population was enslaved) so as to preserve the nascent church's 'freedom to operate'—that is, to spread the Good News. (See generally, *HarperCollins' Bible Dictionary* (1988), *s.v.* slavery in the New Testament.)

Again, none of this is to praise or even necessarily accept, for our own day, Paul's treatment of (and/or willful blindness to) the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire; but only to place it in a larger context so that we do not lose his important theological and spiritual messages for grieving his seeming acceptance of an abhorrent practice.