

Looking forward

January 4, 2015

Homily by Lay Leaders, Shannon Porter and Rory Solomon

Shannon Porter presented:

There's no getting away from it. By now you've probably been bombarded with the slew of advertisements and products that promise a new year and a new you. Weight loss pills and meal plans, fitness clothes in the front of retail areas now, and storage bins to help you de clutter. Moving forward equals getting rid of things and not taking up too much space. New year, new you. Out with the old. You cannot move forward without changing yourself. Now please don't misunderstand, I'm not advocating poor health by any means. But I do question the constant messages we get about how we are all supposed to live our lives.

Life happens to all of us. We move forward every day whether we like it or not. We accumulate and take much with us: wealth, age, families, possessions, knowledge, weight, etc. And most of those things will come and go throughout life, except time. It will keep marching on with or without you. You have the choice every day how to deal with its constant motion. The daily train is departing with or without you. We all know that some days we don't get on the train and participate in the grand scheme, because we know another one will be along tomorrow morning. And we all know that each days journey will always be different. Some days you just take a ride, some you get taken for a ride, some are productive and lead to great adventures. Some go to a place of sadness and despair. Life happens. When you're busy making other plans, life will always happen. It is this time of year that we are told to answer the call and step up to make changes, to move forward. But can we truly move forward without looking back? Without learning lessons first? How does one move forward with all the baggage accumulated during the last year or even from previous years? It seems the answer lies in taking the lessons with you, but leaving the bitter baggage behind. Looking forward is inevitable. Looking back can be either productive or detrimental, depending on your outlook. I've always pondered that life can indeed be like a box of chocolates, but it's also like a child's homework. You know the answers, but you cannot solve the problem for them, otherwise they will not build skills, learn lessons, or move forward.

When I ask people what their perspective is on looking forward in the new year, I get the same answer almost verbatim: "to make this year better than the last one." It's seems ingrained within us to continually strive to be better and to do better. Taking lessons with you seems to be the jumping off point. One of my favorite authors, Elizabeth Gilbert put it so perfectly and bluntly with 2 of my favorite quotes: "ruin is a gift, ruin is the road to transformation." Tragedy and ruin happens to all of us, sometimes on a personal scale, sometimes on a shared universal scale. Looking forward doesn't mean ignoring

the tragedy and dishonoring it. Looking forward is transforming the ruin that comes with inhabiting this life we all share and somehow pushing through. It always seems that we are destined to repeat things until we truly learn our life lessons. History is not destiny.

Ms. Gilbert's other quote I would like to share, sums up what I believe is how to look forward. She calls it "the physics of the quest" and goes: "I've come to believe that there exists in the universe something I call "The Physics of The Quest"—a force of nature governed by laws as real as the laws of gravity or momentum. And the rule of Quest Physics maybe goes like this: "If you are brave enough to leave behind everything familiar and comforting (which can be anything from your house to your bitter old resentments) and set out on a truth-seeking journey (either externally or internally), and if you are truly willing to regard everything that happens to you on that journey as a clue, and if you accept everyone you meet along the way as a teacher, and if you are prepared—most of all—to face (and forgive) some very difficult realities about yourself... then truth will not be withheld from you." Or so I've come to believe."

Rory Solomon presented:

I would like to take a moment now to pass out some river rocks. As you hold them in your hand I would like you to reflect on the incredible nature of these rocks. They are extremely hard and durable, and yet we know that have been chipped away from mountains and tossed and turned and smoothed by water over time. They have been formed by their past and changed by the many events they have faced. In many ways we are quite similar. We too have been shaped by past events and experiences, each moment helping form us into who we are today. Take a moment to reflect on some of these events from this last year that have brought you to where you are at this moment, be they impactful world news stories, Las Vegas happenings, or personal accomplishments.

What has been the best thing that happened to you this last year? What was your biggest challenge? What was the most unexpected event for you over the last year? How have all of these changed you?

We are in a time of reflection, when we look back over the last year and the lives we have lived and make those promises to ourselves for the future. Sometimes this is a daunting task, to wrap up the old and move on to the new. It can be exciting, but also scary and full of uncertainty. How do we make that transition and prepare ourselves to take on the joys and challenges this year will bring?

As Shannon proposed, much can be said for taking the lessons, and leaving the baggage, so let us take a few moments to look back on this last year. This last year was an incredible year for world events, as it so often is. We were faced with record temperatures and drought, outbreaks of viruses (like Ebola), seemingly never ending wars, the disappearance of world citizens, be it in airplanes, or from

kidnappings (like in Mexico and Nigeria), as well as on going protests in the face of our unjust justice system, the landing of a space ship on a comet, and the largest democratic election in history, which took place in India. It was a year of angst and fear, disappointment and unbelievable accomplishments. As we look back and try to make some sense of it all, there are some important take-a-ways I have found.

First, this last year has left me so thankful for this community and the friends I have. When faced with a seemingly never-ending news cycle of shootings and killings and the lack of justice, it has been a great comfort to be able to turn to friends in this community and express anger and share feelings, and know you have someone on your side. To have those who are working to change the injustice they see, or those who can tell you of things they have heard or seen where others are striving for change. There are members of this community who are incredible assets, who can provide a rational thought or two, or who know of just the right resource to turn to in a particular situation.

As I reflect, I have also spent time being amazed by the incredible tenacity of people in our global community. In the face of injustice in the United States, Mexico, Nigeria, and Hong Kong, among others, we have watched protestors come out in force, and they have shown us that when the going gets tough, don't give up. Sometime, in the face of what can seem like a monumental challenge, we are called to find our inner strength and push on through.

People and communities have also asked for help when things get desperate. There has been some incredible cross cultural collaboration, in the face of daunting natural and political disasters. We have seen unbelievable selflessness as we battle epidemics and search for missing people. It is important that while there are some battles we shouldn't give up on, we also need to recognize when to ask others for help.

Here within our own community we have had an exciting and busy year to parallel the global happenings. We have begun to tackle issues of elder care with Nevadan's for the Common Good, stood up for comprehensive sexuality education, celebrated the legalization of gay marriage in our state, welcomed new babies, said goodbye to old friends, reinvigorated our chalice circles, and explored having a yearly theme for our congregation, among many other things.

I am sure I have left out many of the most important events for some of you. Watching Nevadan's for the Common Good come together and strengthen as a community has been a very special experience. As we began to take on issues of a system that is failing the elderly in our community, we have seen individuals, each with different personal strengths, come together to form a powerful whole. Each person who has joined up and contributed to our congregations work in this issue, as well as the organization as a whole, has been able to use their personal strengths and connections to start us down the path towards forming a stronger, more supportive community.

As a congregation we have also pushed ourselves to the front of comprehensive sexuality education reform in our schools here in Clark County. We have talked about it

on Sundays in service, answered surveys, and spoken out at school board meetings. Despite it being a very serious issue with a huge impact on our community, I have also enjoyed the humor that people have found to help diffuse some of the tensions. Talking about sex education can be fun and funny, and I have seen a couple of moments where things could get very tense, instead be brought into perspective with a little humor.

Finally, for many of us our biggest challenges and joys of this last year have been on a very personal level. For me this has included the highs and lows becoming pregnant and watching a dear pet pass away. While my family has been racked with grief over the sudden loss of our beloved dog, I have been learning the lesson of needing to be gentle with each other and ourselves. It is easy with a loss to find yourself focusing on the things you could have done more of, or better with, but the best way to Support each other so far has been to help one another cut ourselves some slack.

On the other side of the spectrum, I am in the midst of a much anticipated pregnancy. As with any big life transition, pregnancy comes with many lessons of its own, including all the things I have talked about thus far, like keeping things in perspective, and the importance of community.

Above all it has become a practice in gratitude. In the midst of long sleepless nights and bouts of morning sickness I am learning to be grateful for the incredible miracle that is life and the hope that it brings. As we stand on the brink of this New Year, I would like to share a poem with you by Anne Hillman to carry us as we embrace the future.

We Look With Uncertainty by Anne Hillman

We look with uncertainty beyond the old choices for clear-cut answers to a softer, more permeable aliveness which is every moment at the brink of death; for something new is being born in us if we but let it. We stand at a new doorway, awaiting that which comes...daring to be human creatures, vulnerable to the beauty of existence. Learning to love.

As we launch off into this new year of experiences unknown, I would like to draw your attention back to your rock for a moment. Think back over events that impacted and shaped you this last year. Know that you, like your rock, are changed with every experience you encounter. You do not have to dwell in each experience and burden yourself with its weight, but you can take a lesson or two with you to add to your store and help prepare you as you step off to meet the unknown.

What lessons will you carry with you?