

Do you make New Year's Resolutions? Or are you afraid you'll just disappoint yourself and others by not being able to keep them? It is true that those who make plans and fail to carry them out can create serious disappointments. The roadways of Nigeria are a landscape of such disappointments – short-term mission groups and grandiose entrepreneurs too often came onto the scene in a rush, promising great and glorious things, only to leave projects and programs that could not sustain themselves and shells of half-built structures like litter along the roadways. It is very disappointing when people do not stick by their good plans to get them fully carried out.

But that should not keep us from resolving to make something happen in our lives or in our world this year. Indeed, the context for our scripture passage today makes clear that we have got to make changes if we don't want to perish. Look at the headers for chapters 13 and 14 in the NIV. Chapter 13: "Repent or Perish!" Turn life around, Jesus tells us – make the changes necessary to plant what little mustard seeds of faith you can muster, to enter the narrow door, so that Jesus won't grieve over you the way he grieved over Jerusalem because it rejected him, just as it had rejected the prophets before him. Doing things differently may get you into trouble, as would eventually happen to Jesus because he healed people on the Sabbath (as he did for the man at a Pharisee's house in ch. 14) and because he made clear that the poor, crippled, blind and lame outcasts will get into God's Kingdom quicker than all the people who have so many good things going on in their lives – buying oxen, getting married – that they think they can excuse themselves from spending time with God and his people at the banquet to which Jesus invites us. Those are the scripture teachings that lead up to our passage today, in which Jesus says: we must count the cost of following him. We must remain determined to carry out the plans God lays upon our hearts, despite the risks and the consequences.

The early Brethren discovered how true this is. They did not intend to separate from their families and friends. They did not try to alienate their neighbors. They simply became totally committed to Jesus, and found that some of the people they loved couldn't do that with them. There were costs to count for being faithful.

This is the first sermon in a series about the beliefs and practices of our church. Over the next three months we will review what Brethren have learned from serious study of the scriptures. This series is designed to help people prepare to become members (there is a short chapter to read each week in the membership preparation book – extra copies are available if others would like to read along). I expect we can all benefit from a review of the commitments that have been

foundational for this congregation, as we prepare for 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the March 25, 1912 decision to establish this meetinghouse and the South Annville meetinghouse as a congregation in its own right in the Church of the Brethren.

That 1912 separation from the Spring Creek Brethren was not recorded as being painful – the Spring Creek Brethren were probably glad to see us grow strong enough to become a congregation in our own right. What was painful was the separation of the first Brethren from their Lutheran or Reformed congregations 200 years earlier in Germany. Those first Brethren had become convinced that studying the Bible prayerfully in order to live it out in our daily lives is the most important thing we can do.

The established churches of that day were not interested in having people study the Bible on their own. They thought people should learn everything they needed to know from their local preacher. But the Pietist Movement was on the rise – as the invention of the printing press and the translation of the Bible into everyday language (German) opened the way for people to read the Bible for themselves.

Alexander Mack and his wife Anna and a handful of others in their village in Germany were viewed with suspicion because they were holding Bible studies in their home. And then when they became convinced that the Bible teaches that believers should repent before being baptized – i.e., be baptized only when old enough to know what they needed to repent of – that's when things got really rough. They had become Anabaptists – people who baptized each other “again,” repudiating their infant baptism as not being what the scriptures require. Worse – so far as the religious leaders of the early 1700's were concerned – they were encouraging people to leave the state churches (Lutheran / Reformed / Catholic) and to be baptized into a fellowship of believers who would study the Bible for themselves and actually live it out. That was considered to be heresy at the time.

It took some gumption to consider Jesus and the New Testament scriptures to be more important than the powers of the church and the state, and more important than family members and friends who wished they would simply do things the way everybody else did ... i.e., just keep the traditions and recite the creeds of the state church. Luke 14 became a key chapter for the early Brethren, as they struggled to be faithful to Jesus, even when it meant that family and friends would persecute them. Each of them would have to carry his/her own cross to be a disciple of Jesus (vs. 27).

What got them into trouble the most was following Jesus' teachings about not swearing an oath and loving their enemies instead of resisting them (Sermon on the Mount - Mt. 5). The government insisted on loyalty oaths and military service. But the early Brethren had counted the cost – and were determined to be faithful to Jesus, no matter what – so they refused to swear an oath and refused to enter military service. Some were forced to work as galley slaves chained to an oar of a ship as a punishment. Would any of our resolutions have such consequences?

Perhaps you have experienced some consequences for remaining faithful to the teachings of the scriptures. Perhaps you were ridiculed or rejected because you decided to conscientiously object to war, or because you sought to care about someone who was considered to be an enemy, rather than to ostracize them.

The early Brethren felt strongly about such efforts to live in peace – not just because they wanted to obey the teachings of Jesus; but also because they wanted to get beyond the war-torn history of Europe in which Christians had ravaged the villages of other Christians – Catholics against Protestants and Protestants against Catholics, back and forth – Christians killing Christians. It was clear to the Brethren that church people were not obeying the central command of Jesus that we should love one another – *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”* (John 13:35). Some Christians seem to only recite these verses, rather than to embody the kind of love that led Jesus to agonize on the cross, seeking forgiveness even for those who crucified him. Making peace by working for reconciliation among all people is not an extra added on by the Brethren – it is at the heart of the redeeming grace proclaimed by the Gospel. The scriptures call us to overcome evil with good. But, of course, that is not easy to do.

This week's Newline told about a BVSer (Brethren Volunteer Service worker) who is returning home from working for an agency called Church and Peace in Germany. Susan Pracht posted some thoughts on Facebook as she completed this assignment – describing how a midnight worship service had given her the magical feeling *“that the coming of the Savior really had changed everything, ourselves, all the beings of the world. [But] in the cold bleakness of January, it's just harder to maintain that belief. Does our attachment to the beautiful sentiment of 'righteousness and peace will kiss each other' (Psalm 85:10) mean anything after Jan. 1, 2012?”* she asked. *“In my ministry with Brethren Volunteer Service, I have had the great privilege of meeting people and communities that have dedicated decades of their lives to the*

*peace movement. What does it take to sustain such a commitment? Based on what I have seen, these people have given themselves as a 'living sacrifice.' ... Peace is not a church project; it is the way of Christ."*

That's what I'm wanting to say in this first sermon in the Year of Our Lord 2012: we are invited to resolve – to make a serious, prayerful commitment – that we will walk in the Way of Jesus ... that we will simply and as fully as possible obey the New Testament. We are called to count the cost – to realize that a resolution to fully follow Jesus will require much energy and spiritual resilience. There may be significant suffering and struggle. But we, like the first Brethren before us, are invited to let Jesus live in us, to let Jesus work through us. Will you make that your New Year's resolution? To let Jesus live in you / work through you.

Over the decades, Brethren have declared that the New Testament is our rule of faith and practice. We have said that we have no creed but Christ. Instead of fighting with other Christians over which wording of a creed is best, we appeal to the scriptures themselves.

And we believe there should be no force in religion –we are one of the historic peace churches, but we have tried to learn to not force beliefs on our members. We do try to persuade, but we believe there should be no force in religion. For a long time now we have stopped disfellowshipping people who enter the military service. Brethren used to do that, but now there are among us many who have been soldiers. Indeed, we recognize that Jesus used some illustrations about going to war in his teachings – like in the passage today. And elsewhere Jesus praised a soldier who had strong faith. I myself have been impressed by some who have actively sought to work for peace and justice in the world through their service in the military, although I would still counsel young men and women to enter the alternative service that our church leaders so painstakingly worked out with the government so that we might be able to serve our country and world without needing to learn how to use weapons to try to force people to do what we believe is right. We simply believe that it is better to influence rather than to force people to do what is right and good. And the best way to influence them is to let Jesus live and work through us. It is important that Christ's redeeming grace be seen in us daily, not just talked about among us. Will you let Christ's forgiveness and redeeming grace become more and more visible in you?

Jesus taught us that the fruits of people's living is most important – he says that people will not enter his kingdom by saying "*Lord, Lord*" to him; they will only enter if they get in gear to actually do the will of the heavenly Father (Mt. 7:21). Will you count the cost to fully live out your faith?

One of the often-quoted scriptures among the Brethren which remind us to count the cost of suffering that may come if we truly live out our faith, and to be ready to endure it, is 1 Peter 2:20-21, which declares: *“If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”* Keep on following in the steps of Jesus! – even through the cross. That is the primary commitment you are asked to make.

And be glad – the Lord does not call you to follow him alone. He places you into a family of faith. That is our statement of purpose as you see it at the top of the order of service: we are *“a family of Christians committed to following Jesus.”*

More than that, we are not alone because Jesus himself is with us. His redeeming grace and his powerful Holy Spirit make us able to follow him. We could not make any resolution stick otherwise. Time and time again we will find ourselves painfully aware of how wretchedly frail we are – we sin, we quaver in fear, we make bad choices, we fail to do the good we know God wants us to do. But God’s amazing grace keeps on calling us to get back up on our feet – to turn away from evil once again, to turn away from our fears and instead turn more and more fully towards Jesus, humbly begging forgiveness and courage, allowing him to cleanse us with his redeeming grace, discovering how he empowers us with his Holy Spirit to rise up to face the powers of this world, and join with brothers and sisters in Christ to move resolutely towards the Kingdom of God!

There may be many times when we will fear we might not have what it takes to fulfill our resolution. But it is the adventure of eternity! And I challenge you to get on with it! Listen - the call of Jesus is intended for you, as surely as for the people among whom he lived ... and Jesus says: *“Come, follow me!”*

As we renew our commitment to follow Jesus throughout 2012, let’s sing a hymn from the very earliest days of the Brethren, written by Alexander Mack, Sr. The hymn speaks of the very serious realities before us – that we must take on great risks to truly follow Jesus. It is sobering and challenging. Please pay attention to the words. Let’s stand to sing.

Hymn 437 *Count Well the Cost*

Words to the hymn “Count Well the Cost,” written by Alexander Mack, Jr., the first minister among the Brethren:

“Count well the cost,” Christ Jesus says, “when you lay the foundation.”  
 Are you resolved, though all seem lost, to risk your reputation,  
 your self, your wealth, for Christ the Lord as you now give your solemn word?

Into Christ’s death be buried now through baptism’s joyous union.  
 No claim of self dare you allow if you desire communion  
 with Christ’s true church, his willing bride, which, through his word, he has supplied.

Within the church’s warm embrace the child of God is molded.  
 God’s Spirit lights the infant face and in God’s grace is folded.  
 With childlike steps, Christ’s plan we trace, till we grow up in godly grace.

In Christian growth we are matured, of fruitful vines a token.  
 That this good growth may be assured oft-times to us is broken  
 the bread of fellowship replete when Christ’s redeemed together meet.

Text: Alexander Mack, Sr., *Überschlag die Kost, Geistreiches Gesang-Buch vor alle liebhabende Seelen der Wahrheit*, 1720;  
 tr. Ora W. Garber, *European Origins of the Brethren*, 1958, alt. Translation copyright © 1958 Church of the Brethren  
 General Board.  
 Music: Johann H. Schein, 1628