

Chapel Words (January 12, 2008) – Rev. Jim Holland

Inspiration is a funny thing. When we are given an essay to write we are usually told where the inspiration is to come from: a book, or a play, a poem or an historical person. But sometimes inspiration can come from the most unexpected places.

When I first set out to put together some thoughts to share with you this morning, not much was coming to mind; or maybe I was filled with so many thoughts and feelings that it was difficult to sort them out. In any event, after I put down a couple of half-formed ideas, I decided to take a break. I clicked on the “File” button at the top of the word processing program, a drop down menu appeared and, *voila*, there was my theme.

Can anyone tell me the first word that appears under the File menu on most word processors? The first word is . . . “New.” There is so much that is new about today. We are in the first few weeks of a New Year and the first days of a new term. I am new to you and you are new to me. And this is the beginning of a new era for the Shawnigan Lake School Chapel.

New is good. I have a new shirt in my drawer at home. It is a thick cotton shirt with a wide collar and a zipper part way down the front. And it’s orange. I know it sounds dreadful, but it is actually a great shirt. It is so new that it still has the tags on it. I like to see it there when I open the drawer. It looks so fresh and clean. In fact I am enjoying it so much that I may never wear it. Because once I wear it, it will no longer be new. New doesn’t last very long.

That’s the nature of new. A new experience, a new situation, a new thing is only new for a moment. Then, very quickly, it becomes old. Even my beautiful orange shirt, if I leave it in the drawer, won’t be new for very much longer. It will simply become an old shirt that I’ve never worn. My point isn’t that old is a negative thing, but that the moment when something is new is exciting, and dramatic, and brief.

There are different kinds of new. The new I have been talking about is a temporal thing. It has to do with the duration of a thing’s existence. But there is another kind of new. We might call it a spiritual understanding of new, and it has to do with attitude and choice.

All great spiritual leaders have spoken about this notion of newness. St. Paul said that the only way that he could describe his own spiritual awakening was that it was as if he took off his old person, and put on a new one. The writer of the Book of Revelations describes a vision he had of Jesus, in which Jesus said, “Behold I make all things new.” Buddha and Mohamed both spoke of the newness of life; of our capacity to renew ourselves over and over again.

One way to understand this, is to think of the thoughts and feelings you had when you woke up this morning. Some days we awaken and we look around, and we say, “This day looks pretty much the same as yesterday. I am likely going to encounter the same hassles, the same problems, the same disappointments that I encountered yesterday and the day before that. The same people are going to smile at me and the same people are going to sneer at me, and nothing will change.” But we can choose to see the day in a different way. We can look around us and say, “This day is unlike any before it. It is filled with new opportunities, new challenges, new chances. Today I will experience new relationships, new ideas, new solutions. Today is an empty canvas waiting for me to create it.”

What is the difference between these two choices? Believe it or not, we can find the answer in that drop down menu under “File.” The second word in the File menu is . . . ? Anyone? “Open.” Open is good too. Because when we are truly open, then life becomes interesting, and exciting. Being open isn’t always easy. Taking on new challenges isn’t always easy. It is easy to stay with what we know. It is easy to relive yesterday over and over. But I know that when I don’t put myself in new situations and tackle new challenges I become bored and stale. It is when we put ourselves into new situations—especially situations that aren’t necessarily easy ones—it is only then that we grow, that we come to know ourselves as we truly are; with certain strengths and certain weaknesses, with skills and abilities, fears and reservoirs of strength. Embracing new challenges is what Shawnigan Lake School is all about, and it is one of the reasons I am happy to be here with you. I am excited to be in a place where staff and students are encouraged and supported in trying new things.

Of course, embracing the new doesn’t mean abandoning the old. Who knows the fourth word in the drop down menu under “File?” It is “Save.”

Real wisdom is knowing what to save from the past and what to put into the trash bin; what to hold on to and what to let go. This, too, is part of the process of learning and growing. I look forward, in the weeks to come, to learning and growing with you, as we work to open ourselves to the “new” around us. My hope is to bring some new challenges to you, to open you up to some new possibilities, to offer some new ways of thinking about ourselves and our lives, and our life together.

And what is the third word in the File menu? . . . “Close,” which is what I am going to do right now.