

NEW YEARS EVE 2007  
Colossians 3:17; Luke 13:6-9

*“In the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

Some of you may remember Nicholas’ joy when the trustees and I got to spend some quality time together digging up the yard to find the septic tank. The thought of a “poop tank” as he called it was just too hilarious. Things only got more exciting when the “poop man” came in the “poop truck” to clean out the “poop tank.” Oh, the joys of childhood. Thank God the truck driver for the septic company was a good sport.

Nicholas’ love for such material, however, did not develop in a vacuum. His old man loves a good septic tale as well. Of all my qualities, I am pretty sure that is not one of them that attracted Tricia to me—to be honest, I’m still trying to figure out what quality it might be that did so. You can imagine my joy then when I came across a septic tale in the news last week.

I don’t know how Christmas Eve went for most of you, but I guarantee you had a better Christmas Eve than Robert Schoff of Des Moines. The Des Moines Register reported, and I quote:

Firefighters had to rescue the 77-year-old when he got stuck in the opening to his septic tank.

He had dug a hole and reached inside to find a clog when he lost his balance and became wedged.

"It wasn't good, I'll tell you what," said Schoff. "It was the worst Christmas Eve I've ever had,"

The 5-foot-5-inch, 135-pound Schoff hollered, screamed, and hoped his wife, Toni, would hear his cries for help. He waited for an hour until she walked by a window and noticed feet in the air.

"I saw these kicking feet and ran out, but couldn't get him out," Toni Schoff said.

She went to the house and called 911, and two Polk County sheriff's deputies arrived to yank her husband out.

"How that happened, I don't know," he said. "I thought it was the end of my life. Thank God my wife saw me. I don't think I could have stood staying in there much more. She's my lifesaver."

If there were ever a definition for the German word, *Schadenfreude*, that is, taking pleasure from another person’s misfortune, my reaction to this story would be it. The thought of poor Robert’s legs sticking out of the septic tank, waiving back and forth as if he were trying to run away, was just too much for me. Really, it sort of still is. The only part that could have made it better would have been if the reporter had been a little more dutiful, and when Robert complained about the mess in there, asked, “Well, Robert, who put it there?”

Ok, let me try to grow up now. I did include this tale for a reason, after all. In a lot of ways, New Year’s Eve every year is like Rober Schoff’s Christmas Eve. As we look back, we in many ways stick our head back into a mess; we notice a lot that stinks. For many in Saginaw, I would venture to say that this is especially true this year. **Lots have lost things they’d counted on for years. Many have had things take unexpected and frightening turns.** And as we sit at the end of 2007, a good number of us are ready and willing to get it over with, to put it behind us. Its been a long year—I know its been one of the longest for me—and it’ll be nice in many ways to plug our nostrils, put the cap on it, and say, “good riddance.”

But New Year’s Eve is also a time for self-examination. We have to ask if all that stinks is from the world, the economy, the unexpected, from other people. **No, much of what has made this year disappointing, much of what has made this year a little long, much of what has made this year a little cumbersome is what we ourselves have put there.** Jesus parable applies to us as well. We are the unfruitful fig trees, whose fruit has been sparse at best, far short of the harvest our God could expect and even demand. All of us, if we are honest, have to admit that it would hardly come as a shock, that we could hardly call foul play if the Lord were to say of us, **“Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?”**

But what does Jesus say? Our gracious Gardner and Advocate intercedes for us and says, **“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”**

But how? How can we bear fruit? How can we grow and flourish in the Spirit? St. Paul tells us in the verse before us, Colossians 3:17, **“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”**

The problem is not that we have not loved ourselves and our neighbor in the past. The problem is that we have not loved ourselves and our neighbor **“in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** There is a thin line between feeding yourself and feeding your sinful nature, between serving your neighbor and serving your neighbor’s sinful nature, and that line is this: **“in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”**

Unfortunately, it’s the **“in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”** that’s the hard part, although it is also the most liberating. I’d be a liar to tell you that it is as easy for me to get pumped up to preach to an underwhelming turnout as it is to a surprisingly overwhelming turnout. You’d be a liar to tell me that it is as easy to tend to an **ungrateful child as it is to a grateful child**, to work hard for a **discouraging employer as an encouraging employer**, as easy to study diligently in the classroom of a **complacent or distracted teacher as a spirited and devoted teacher**, to love a **melancholy or headstrong spouse as a affectionate spouse**, to listen to a **plodding preacher with a love for septic illustrations as a golden-tongued preacher whose words like a chariot carry you to loftier realms**. It is hard to throw ourselves into something when there seems to be little reward, little return, little reciprocation, little glory. Yet St. Paul tells us to do everything **“in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”**

Christ is our model. Christ is our example. Most importantly, Christ is our Savior. **And Christ performed His greatest saving feat surrounded by those who appreciated it least, who in fact mocked Him for His love and devotion, who stripped Him of all honor and glory and dressed Him with undeserved shame for all to see.** Christ is our model. Christ is our example. Most importantly, Christ is our Savior. **And when He suffered and died for your sins, as when He was born, as when He rose and ascended, what was His audience but a handful of the edgelings of society and what was His thanks but the overwhelming apathy of the world He came to save?** Yet saved you are, because what Christ did He did, not to serve His belly or to serve His neighbors’ selfish hopes, but for His God and for His neighbor in the name of His God and Father.

And that is the greatest love that can be shown, and that is why this verse is so liberating, even if it places a hard task before us, **because the motivation and end goal of all we say and do and think is rescued from the confusion of selfish expectations or worldly standards or sinful desires and located instead in the one thing that is pure, that is eternal, that is true: “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”**

Service rooted in gratitude to Him who saved you by His death and resurrection is never service in vain, even if it pays less than we’d like at times, even if it brings us a little less attention or gratitude than we’d prefer, **because the thought of our Savior smiling in heaven, delighting that His heart has to a certain extent become our own through faith, is the greatest reward a Christian could receive.**

It’s all the rest that stinks. It’s all the rest that is fit for nothing but the septic tank. But this, that is, thoughts and words and deeds **“in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him,”** this is the sweet stuff of the heaven, this is God’s gift to us, even as we through faith and in love seek to make it our gift to one another, in 2008 and in every year the Lord should give us. Amen.