Sunday, January 1, 1989
BEGINNINGS WITHOUT END
Philippians 3:12-16; Luke 9:57-62

We human beings do not like to let go of anything. We have difficulty even in letting go of our mistakes and failures, our grudges, our hates, our resentments, and our bad habits. We do not like to leave things behind. We do not like to lose things. Someone has said that all fear is the fear of loss. There is not a fear you can think of that isn't a fear of loss.

Sometimes we think of it as "I fear pain," but it really is "I fear the loss of comfort." Or we think, "I fear disapproval," but it's really, "I fear the loss of the kind of relationship I have before I am disapproved of."

And yet the paradox is that as much as we fear loss, loss is a part of life. Sometimes when we think of loss, we think primarily of the loss, through death, of the people we love. But loss is a far more encompassing theme in our life. For we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go, and by moving on.

In fact, there are many necessary losses in life. We cannot move on without leaving behind impossible expectations, mistakes, failures, wrong assumptions, grudges, and even the loss of our younger selves — the self that thought it would always be unwrinkled, invulnerable, and immortal.

Many of our losses are not only a part of life but are universal and unavoidable. And these losses are necessary because we grow by losing, leaving, and letting go.

That's what the Apostle Paul was writing about in his letter to the Philippians when he said, "But one thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

So, on this first Sunday of the New Year, it's a good time to think about what we need to leave behind and about embracing new beginnings.

There is a revealing statement in Lyndon Johnson's biography by Merle Miller in which the former President reflects on his handling of the Vietnam crisis. In 1969, after he had left office, Johnson says in retrospect, "I never felt I had the luxury of re-examining my basic assumption. Once the decision to commit military forces was made, all our energies were turned to vindicating that choice and finding a way to somehow make it work."

It's a sad commentary. Re-examining one's assumptions is never a luxury — it is a necessity! It's a tragedy when people get locked into a set of assumptions — about themselves, the world, other people, or God. We can be thankful, for example, that Columbus questioned the assumption that the world was flat.

But why do we have such difficulty questioning our assumptions and leaving old ideas and prejudices behind?

A psychologist named Edward De Bono has studied how the mind forms (and resists) new ideas. He compares the process of thinking to digging holes and uses this example: "It is not possible to dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper. Logic is the tool

that is used to dig deeper holes. But if a hole is in the wrong place, then no amount of digging it deeper is going to put it in the right place. No matter how obvious this may seem to every digger, it is still easier to go on digging in the same hole than to start all over again in a new place."

This disinclination to abandon a half-dug hole (which is like questioning an old assumption) is partly a reluctance to abandon the investment of effort that has gone into the hole without seeing some return. It is also easier to go on doing the same thing rather than wonder what else to do. There is a strong commitment to it. Henry Ford had that kind of trouble changing from the Model T.

In a similar way, it is not possible to look in a different direction by looking harder in the same direction. No sooner are two thoughts strung together than there is a direction, and it becomes easier to string further thoughts along in the same direction than to ignore it or question whether it's the right direction in the first place.

For example, by far the greatest amount of scientific effort is directed towards the logical enlargement of some accepted hole... yet startling new ideas and huge scientific advances have often come about through people ignoring the hole that is in progress and starting a new one.

One of the most effective medical discoveries of all time came about when Edward Jenner shifted his attention from why people got smallpox to why dairymaids apparently did not. From the discovery that harmless cowpox gave protection against deadly smallpox came vaccination and the end of smallpox as a scourge in the western world.

In one of Sherlock Holmes's cases, his assistant, Dr. Watson, pointed out that a certain dog was of no importance to the case because it did not appear to have done anything. Sherlock Holmes took the opposite point of view and maintained that the fact that the dog had done nothing was of the utmost significance, for it should have been expected to do something, and on this basis, he solved the case.

All of this is why repentance is such a persistent theme in Scripture. What is repentance? It is the reappraisal of old assumptions in order to proceed forward. The very word means "to turn." To repent means to turn and take a new direction, and that implies a new beginning and letting go — leaving some old habits, old thoughts, hates, and prejudices behind.

And no matter what some Christian evangelists say, repentance is a repeat performance. It's something that needs to be done over and over again.

Some of the most helpful research in how education takes place has been done in the past 20 years by Harvard Professor Lawrence Kohlberg. He outlines six stages of moral development, each building on the former. Kohlberg insists on the impossibility of anyone ever skipping a step because moral development is a process.

Now others are coming along and are describing faith development in a similar fashion — as a process with identifiable stages. And we can continue to grow in our faith until we die. To do so, however, means a sequence of fresh starts, a series of re-examining old assumptions. Then there are new beginnings without end.

There was a minister known simply as Preacher Gordon who served a Presbyterian Church in Florida. He was much loved and respected, especially known for his sharp wit and his gift for the quick comeback. Preacher never married, and consequently, he became the object of the attention of many of the older women of the congregation. Reportedly, a team would go to the parsonage every Monday morning to do his laundry.

One of his doting female admirers moved away and was gone for several years. Then one Sunday, she showed up in church. After the service, she did what no one should ever do to any minister — she grabbed his hand and said expectantly, “Preacher, I’ll bet you’ve forgotten my name.” With a wink, and not so much as a pause, Preacher said, “Darling, I had to forget your name in order to get on with my work.”

In a much more serious sense, that is what the Apostle Paul is saying to the Philippians. “Forgetting the past, press on in order to attain the higher calling.” It is a principle of life that one needs to forget, to be willing to let go, to leave behind in order to get on with one’s work of growing.

Who has not known firsthand the debilitating effect of trying to hang on to an old love, or worse, an old hatred, some old grudge grown moldy and long since overdue for discarding?

What is it about us that keeps fueling old feuds, afraid somehow to let go of earlier assumptions, afraid of admitting error or ignorance? Why not, on this first day of the New Year, leave our mistakes behind and move on?

Growth — spiritual, emotional, intellectual — as much as anything else, is a matter of how we manage our mistakes and our old assumptions. As far as growth in faith is concerned, so much hinges on our assumptions about God.

I had a woman in a previous parish who would not take Communion because, as she put it, “I don’t deserve it.” Despite all my efforts to persuade her that God does not hold grudges and that the whole point of Communion is that God loves and accepts us, she was convinced that her mistakes of the past stood in the way of God’s acceptance. Somehow she could not leave her mistakes behind, and secondly, she could not bring herself to examine her old assumptions of God as a kind of austere presence presiding over life as if it were an old-fashioned spelling bee — one mistake and you’re out.

Nothing could betray the truth of the Christian gospel more. The preeminent image of God, according to Jesus, is that of one quick to forgive, eager to forget in order to get on with the greater work of growth. Unfortunately, repentance is too often thought of in a negative sense, whereas it is the opposite. It is leaving our mistakes behind. It is a fresh start with a slate wiped clean. It is the goodness of God that leads to repentance — not God’s harshness, not God’s judgment, but God’s goodness. With God, your present and your future are always more important than your past.

So this year, in addition to any New Year’s Resolutions you might have made, make a list of those things you want to leave behind.

First of all, leave behind the wrongs done to you by others. Forget the hates you have from the past and the hurts you have experienced. The Bible reminds us that “love does not keep a record of wrongs.”

Secondly, leave behind the bad decisions you have made during the past year — those things that are now done with and cannot be changed. So often I hear people say, “If only I had decided another way five years ago, or two years ago, or last year, then my whole life would be different.” And they keep looking back and reliving again and again a tragic mistake. It’s over. Leave it behind.

Thirdly, do not be afraid to re-examine your old assumptions.

And finally, remember, with God we are always provided with new beginnings without end. God never runs out of beginnings. Amen.