

THE OLD AND THE NEW

St. Matthew 13:52

Powerful lessons today — I hope they grabbed you not only by the mind but also by the heart! First this majestic story of King Solomon, who is offered by God all the tickets to the lottery but instead says, Please give me an understanding and a discerning mind so I can do well my job of leading your people. No wonder Solomon is known as the Wise Man of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Then there is this climax to the great 8th chapter of Romans, where St. Paul says two absolutely important things. First, he says all things work together for good for those who love God, or better, God is at work in all things for our good. He doesn't mean God is the cause of everything that's happening so that everything that happens is God's will but rather that nothing that happens can shut God out or turn off God's goodness and mercy. Parade Magazine had a nice article some years ago about how this was true with the World Trade Towers disaster. We wouldn't say God caused that disaster, it was a huge tragedy, a great crime, but God has brought much good even out of it. And you no doubt have stories from your own life about how God continued to work in a tragedy or an unhappiness to bring good out of it for you.

God is at work in all things for good for those who love him: that's the first thing Paul says in Romans 8. And the second thing is that nothing in life or death can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Friends, these are benchmarks of our faith - pastors quote these verses to people in need as much as they quote Psalm 23.

Finally, Jesus gives us six more parables, little ones, to go with his parables on the previous two Sundays, the parable of the sower and the parable of the wheat and the weeds, ending with this one about the master who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. Parables are funny things — sometimes they're easy to understand, sometimes they mystify us. It's easy to wish the disciples had gotten Jesus to say a bit more about some of them, for their sake and for ours.

Then Jesus talks about how the old and the new get mixed together in our lives - old wisdom and new insights, old traditions and new beginnings. In fact, that's what a parable is — it's using something old and familiar (like a pearl) to explain something new and exciting (like the treasure of God's gracious kingdom). It's even a good picture of what Sunday

mornings can be like for us. We come here to hear old stories and old ideas but always so that we can go home and deal with our circumstances in fresh ways, so that we can find new direction and energy for our lives. It takes some work for you as a listener, and it takes some work for us as preachers, but I hope it's worth it. Some people were asked once what they look for in a good sermon, and they said they liked sermons that helped them see things in a new way.

You know the joy of it, I hope. You listen to a sermon on the Prodigal Son, and at first you think: oh, that old saw - here we go again! But then you get a new insight, or you see how something speaks to what's going on in your life, and you say Aha! Here's something I have to think more about. And there is joy in those Aha moments.

But there's joy also in the old, isn't there? When Christmas rolls around again in five months, shall we go looking for new Christmas songs, or will the old familiar carols you know by heart bring you joy? We've learned to love those songs, and we easily look forward to singing them again, even as old as they are. And when someone comes up with a new Christmas song, we say, That's nice, too. Give us a few years with it. We can take it both ways - we can love the old and the new.

When Jesus taught, people thought they knew what he meant by the kingdom of God. They had their own ideas and their stories about it — coming of Messiah, defeat of the Romans, etc. But then Jesus told them some new stories/parables about it, and he made them look at it in a new way. For example, they thought God would usher in his new reign with them in a dramatic way. But Jesus said it might be more like a mustard seed — starting so small you could easily miss it but then growing to be very big. Jesus compared God's kingdom not to a Disney extravaganza but to a place where lost sheep get found, and seeds grow secretly, and weeds and wheat are growing together in the same field. Jesus, it seems, was always bringing something new out of what was old.

Here at church we use a variety of liturgies and songs, sometimes a new one to add to the ones we've been doing so long we hardly have to think about them. Good worship is always a mix of the old and the new. You don't want to have to learn something brand new every week, but you don't

want to say and sing the same old thing week after week either. I love to sing Precious Lord, Take My Hand and My Faith Looks Up to Thee, but I also love to sing Borning Cry and Gather Us In and Thine the Amen.

At a worship workshop once the people got to talking about needing new music, as if they were tired of the old music, but one woman spoke up to say "Bach was also a Christian." Last Friday, in fact, was the 273rd anniversary of J.S. Bach's death. It's the day when our churches commemorate not only J.S. Bach but also George Frederick Handel, who died 9 years later, and a lesser-known composer who lived a century earlier (Heinrich Schuetz). We appreciate the music of these great composers, particularly Handel's Messiah, which is more than 250 years old. Many music experts think Bach is the greatest composer of all times...and he was a Lutheran church organist! Just like this woman over here (Donna Olsen)!

Lewis Thomas, the noted biologist and philosopher, was asked once what artifact of our civilization he would most like to send to other galaxies to let them know what's going on in our galaxy, and he suggested a continuous playing of the music of J.S. Bach. And then he added, But that would be boasting. People like Bach and Handel, old-timers, have made huge contributions to the music of not only the church but also the world/culture (think of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos and Handel's Water Music), and we easily remember and rightly celebrate them.

And yet Jesus tells us to go out into all the world with the good news. This means news for today's world, not yesterday's. If we don't set this good news of Jesus down alongside today's newspaper, it may look as if we're calling people back to some fantasy world that doesn't exist anymore, but what the Holy Spirit is always doing is calling us forward into the future. To love the past too much can put a choke-hold on this Spirit. We don't want to do that. We want to learn to appreciate in equal measure what is old and what is new.

Jesus refers to the homeowner who has both old and new things in his closet. I suppose we all are like that. Open our closets and you'll find a lot of clothes that have been there a long time, and mixed in will be some shirts and trousers and blouses and dresses that are relatively new. Which are you wearing today, the old or the new? Just like our closets, our lives are composed of the old and the new.

Here at church, some of us like one more than the other. Some talk as if they don't like anything new, and some talk as if they don't like anything old. It takes both kinds to make up a congregation, I suppose. And surely it takes patience with one another and consideration as we explore both old and new together. We each should express our preference, but none of us (including us pastors) should ever insist on our own way.

It takes a while to learn something new, a new song or a new liturgy, but how often has it happened that we have grown to love very much something we didn't at first like?

Jesus is Lord not only of the past, Jesus is Lord also of the future. He is the man for all seasons...and the man for all ages (even all our ages). We want to sing and celebrate his beauty and his victory, his grace and his gifts, his presence and his promise not just in terms of times past but also in terms of times to come, for our parents and our ancestors but also for our children and our grandchildren. The challenge for Christians today is to be well rooted in the old, the Bible and its stories, but to be ready and eager to bear the new, fresh fruit of the Spirit for our own day. (Tom Wright)

As Jesus sometimes says after a challenging parable, Let those who have ears to hear listen!

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