

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany- January 28, 2024

Scripture lesson: Matthew 13:52

OLD AND NEW

“Therefore, every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52).

I hear this verse and imagine a well-to-do fellow with a large trunk open in front of him. He reaches into it and brings out items old and new. He cherishes each one as wonderful and valuable.

Jesus says that this is the way of everyone who has been, as Matthew’s Greek puts it, “discipled” or “disciplined” for the kingdom of heaven. As Christians, we’re taught how to bring out from the great treasure of God’s word, of God’s revelation, both what is old and what is new.

A group of laypeople were surveyed about their attitudes towards preaching. What did they look for in a good sermon? Their predominant response was “I like a sermon that helps me to see things in a new way.” They particularly appreciated preaching that helped them ponder a familiar Christian theme from an angle they hadn’t considered before.

Perhaps you can relate to that. You’re listening to a sermon about, let’s say, the parable of the prodigal son and you’re sighing, “Here we go again. How many times have I heard this before?” But then you receive some fresh and unexpected insight into it, and you think, “Hey, it’s as though I’ve heard a new word from the Lord.”

But, undeniably, there’s also great satisfaction in the old. For instance, when Christmas time comes, we probably don’t want our worship leaders to go rummaging around for brand new songs to sing on Christmas Eve. Instead, we rejoice in the old familiar carols that we know by heart. That’s what the old, beloved texts and songs do- they run deep, deep, and deeper into our marrow.

We know them not just in our heads, but in our very souls, which makes them all the more meaningful to us. Sometimes the church is accused of being backward, old, and out of date, but the truth is that we’ve learned the joy of not having to re-create our faith from scratch in every generation. We have a rich store of treasures that have been committed to our care in the gifts given to us long ago.

At the same time, new generations keep being born. The world keeps changing. And, above all, the Holy Spirit keeps moving. Our ancient Scriptures remind us that the Lord who “has been our dwelling place from all generations” (Psalm 90:1) and who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) is also the One who declares, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5) and who says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you’re not ready for them now” (John 16:12).

Furthermore, as members of this congregation and of the United Church of Christ, we’re reminded each time we turn to the title page of our hymn book that our revered Pilgrim ancestor, John Robinson, said: “The Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth from his

holy word.” We therefore keep going back gratefully not only to the treasure of our old gifts. We also keep praying for open hearts and minds to recognize and gladly receive the new gifts that God wants to give.

Today then, let each of us first ask: in my own personal faith and practice as a Christian, where do I need to remember and cherish the old and where do I need to recognize and welcome the new?

When Jesus taught, people thought they knew what he meant when he said, “the kingdom of heaven.” But when he told his parables about that kingdom, they were surprised to hear it compared to a place where lost sheep are found, where seeds are secretly growing, and where a man is finding a treasure buried in a field. Jesus was bringing something new for them out of what was old.

That’s why I think it’s critically important that as his followers we strive for a mix between the comfortable, the reassuring and the familiar on the one hand and the surprising, the new, and even the shocking on the other. God ministers to us through both.

I recall being in a workshop on worship where the lead presenter spoke about the need for new Christian music. He lamented the way that our traditional music often comes across now as deadening, hard to sing, and out of date. It seemed that almost everyone in the room, including me, was ready to agree.

But then a woman stood up and said, “I’m sure that what you say has a great deal of truth to it. I don’t doubt that at all. Yet we also need to remember that Johann Sebastian Bach was a Christian. He created and gave his music from the heart of his Christian life. His gift is a great treasure that is still available to any and every age.” We knew that she spoke the truth too.

We’re not the first ones to live this faith. We have the treasure of countless others who’ve walked the Christian way before us. Every generation now has God’s previous gift of J.S. Bach and other musical masters to help us sing the Lord’s song, and hallelujah for that.

But Jesus has commanded us to go into the *whole* world to proclaim his good news, which, of course, includes our 21st century world as it is now. He calls us to share the gospel in ways that can best be heard by people as they are today because if we don’t, we’ll likely give the wrong impression that our faith is merely a frightened escape into a fantasy world that serves only to keep us woefully and sadly out of touch.

After all, as Christians, we *do* believe in the Holy Spirit, the presence of God with us now, the One who also is always leading us ahead into God’s future. If we love the past too much or in the wrong way, if indeed we idolize it, then we sin against the Holy Spirit. The true and triune God is dynamic and creative beyond our imagining. Jesus Christ is Lord not only of the dead, but of the living, and not just of the past, but of the present and the future, too.

Which is why, for example, in recent decades many congregations in our United Church of Christ and other denominations have, as you also are now considering, explicitly stated a firm no to our long-standing Christian tradition of condemning and excluding from our churches people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Instead, such congregations, like the one I long served in Haslett, have deliberately made official statements of their intention to affirm and welcome as fully as anyone else, not only LGBT folks and their families, but also other people who’ve frequently been excluded or marginalized from our churches because, for instance, of their race, ethnicity, nationality, class, cultural background, or physical, mental, or emotional illness or disability.

So, in the faith and practice of this First Congregational United Church of Christ, let all of us, whether as members or as friends, also seriously ask, “Where, as a congregation, do we need to keep remembering and cherishing the old? And where do we, as a people, need to awaken to and embrace the new?”

Note once more that Jesus says, “Every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new.” He doesn’t say “brings from his treasure what is old *instead of* what is new” or “what is new *instead of* what is old.” He doesn’t privilege either the old or the new, but calls us to value them both, to love what already has been received and to welcome what is ready now to be given.

At our best, I believe that we gladly do this. We submit to the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors, seeking to fully understand and take rightly to heart the Scriptures and other teaching traditions that they’ve passed on to us. We learn to appreciate and to enter gratefully into the rhythms and forms of the worship heritage that they also provide.

At the same time, we listen for what God is saying to us in the context of our *current* times and places. In worship, we try out new tunes. We experiment with different liturgical forms. In our teaching and learning, we explore and engage with contemporary perspectives that can help to enrich, deepen, and sometimes even transform our understandings and convictions. In doing these things, we strive to worship in spirit and in truth. We seek to do the Lord’s will in fresh ways that faithfully bring out from the treasure of God’s revelation not only what is old but what is new.

Some of us, I’m sure, are better at one or the other of these. Some of us have a great love for the past and instinctively nurture our appreciation for it. Others of us eagerly search for the “new and improved” model of anything and everything. It takes both kinds of us to have a healthy congregation. It takes both kinds of attitude within us as individual Christians to have a healthy faith.

It’s true that our spiritual need sometimes is such that we *crave* the traditional forms of our past. We *hunger* for the familiar and time-honored ways of confessing that Jesus Christ has been Lord for many generations before us, and that he is the true and faithful Lord of everyone now, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

At other times, though, we *yearn* for the gift of something fresh and unexpected. We thirst for something new, startling, or even radically different that can spark insights for us into how Jesus is moving now in the power of the Spirit to make all things new.

Through God’s tender mercies faithfully reflected in the love that we have for and show to each other, we can move back and forth gracefully between these two. May our prayer then always be both as a congregation and as individual members and friends of this church, that we will have an ever-increasing desire and ability to do exactly that. In other words, help us, O Lord, to take to heart both the old and the new. Give us Your wisdom to discern and embrace both as Your precious and wonderful gifts. Amen.