

Something Old, Something New

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“You have heard that it was said to those
of ancient times . . . but I say to you. . . .” -- Matthew 5:21-22

Those of us above a certain age all know how the following goes – say it with me:
Something old,
Something new,
Something borrowed,
Something blue,
(And a silver sixpence in her shoe.)

That's right, it's the old folk rhyme advising a bride on what she needs for good luck on her wedding day. Most of us have forgotten the sixpence line, if we ever knew it, because we Americans haven't used that particular piece of British currency since our colonial days.

Something old and something new is how we get through life. It's how we survive and make sense of our days, as Marjorie Thompson says on the front of this morning's bulletin. We interweave the old and the new, and if we're mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, that interweaving allows us to cope. If we're not healthy, that interweaving becomes tangled and knotted in our minds and spirits and even in our bodies, and we become ill.

Some of you probably watched the PBS documentary a few months ago on cancer. Even though cancer has been a mental and emotional part of my life for over fifty years – since the time my mother was diagnosed with it when I was five – I didn't know what cancer actually is until a few years ago.

Cancer is nothing more than cells that refuse to die. Cancer cells are those cells that don't go through the natural biological life cycle that all cells are supposed to go through, but instead they keep dividing and growing and hanging around in our bodies. And because they don't go the way of all flesh, they become masses and tumors, and deprive other cells of the chance to be born and thrive, and that's what makes us sick and can kill us. Ironically, it's cells that refuse to die that can kill us. Growing old and dying is an essential part of life at even the cellular level. How hard it is for us to accept that basic and inescapable truth!

Like every lucky bride, we are mixtures, you and I, of the old and the new. Scientists tell us that it takes about seven years for all of the roughly 37 trillion cells that make up an adult human body to emerge, serve their purpose, die, and be replaced by new cells. So that means that, at the cellular level, there have been about eight of me since the fourteenth of April in 1959. I am not the person I was eight years ago and neither is any of you. So Paul was right in a way he could never have known: we are, literally and physically, new creations in Christ about every seven years.

Creation continues to unfold “in us, around us, with us, and through us,” as we pray at Holy Communion. It's easy to forget that creation isn't a done deal, that every rock or tree or fish or saber-toothed cat that is ever going to be has already been.

This is the great religious truth that Charles Darwin told us the fossil record shows us – the on-goingness of God's creation. That's all evolution is, the on-goingness of God's creation, but small, conservative, reactionary minds couldn't bring the new knowledge into their understanding of the old, old story, and another wedge was falsely and unnecessarily driven between two kinds of truth.

People often say today that Genesis isn't science, and that's true if, by science, you mean the branch of human learning that slowly emerged after the Middle Ages; but Genesis *was* science for the people who wrote it and first heard it, and what made it science was its attempt to answer some basic questions about the world. Where did the world come from, what's it made of, why do things work the way they do – or don't?

That's science in its most elementary form. All science starts with those sorts of big, simple questions, and all of the answers that science has ever come up with have been the result of combining old and new knowledge. Something old, something new – they're the left and right legs that move science forward.

They're also the legs of religion, although we religious folk have the annoying tendency to try to hop along on the one leg of ancient truth, which we believe was “delivered once and for all to the saints” as the book of Jude puts it.

We Protestants are especially prone to this disability – and that's what it is, a disability, in the etymological sense of that word – because we rejected the notion of ongoing revelation in and to the church because we wanted to throw off the authority of the pope, bishops, and councils and become our own little authorities in our own little churches. In the process, we became not simply bibliocentric but bibliomaniac, and we turned the Bible into an idol.

There are a lot of Christians today who still treat the Bible as something to be handled with kid gloves. Every time I teach Introduction to Biblical Studies in the Lay School, which I'll be doing this fall, one of the points I have to cover in my first lecture is that it's okay to write in your Bible. A few people – not many, but a few in every class – seem to feel it's sacrilegious to make notes in the margins of pages or to underline words or passages or to draw arrows showing that this part relates to that part. I have to remind folks that the Bible's sacredness comes not from paper and ink, but rather from its status as a tool of the Holy Spirit with the ability to change lives. It's the spiritual reality of the Word of God, and not its physical manifestation from a publisher that's powerful and sacred; and unless you possess an extraordinary memory or the ability to take notes with stunning fidelity, you'll need to write in your Bible. Write in it, I say, and show God how much you care.

You need to study God's Word in written form, and you need to study it diligently and carefully if you're going to grasp the truth of such passages as Barb and I read out loud this morning. What is the time to hate, as the sage of Ecclesiastes says there is? Or the time for war or the time to kill? Or what is the time to be born? Simply nine months after mom and pop spent an energetic night together? Or does Qoheleth mean that you and I were born at the time God appointed for us, so that we might reflect God's glory in our unique way in our time and our place?

Are you doing that? Are you living out the truths of ancient wisdom as only you can, for the benefit of creation and the glory of God, or are you sleepwalking through life? Are you bringing something old – human insights gained through arduous experience over long periods of time – into the new situations that confront every generation, or are you pretending that no generation before ours has had to cope with such challenges as the equitable distribution of natural resources, the conflicts of competing ideologies, or what constitutes a genuine family?

People who don't know history don't know history's lessons, and the fewer of those

lessons we learn, the more difficult and wasteful we make trying to live together on planet earth. Western consumerism and Islamic fundamentalism are not the first clash of civilizations and world views; what lessons can we bring forward from the past to help us see our way through these troublous times? Do the Crusades, when the Christian west and the Muslim east clashed before, have nothing to teach us? If not, it's not because of them, it's because of us. Old and new belong together if you want to move forward. We're stuck because we ignore this fundamental truth.

And to move us forward as a church is the reason I have taken as my text this morning Jesus's famous antithesis from the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times . . . but I say to you. . . ." Jesus says that five times in this, his most famous teaching, and what he was attempting to do in that series of antitheses was explain what it means to fulfill the law, because that, he said explicitly, was his mission.

It's not enough not to murder; that's not fulfilling the law. It may be obeying the law, but it's not fulfilling the law. To fulfill the law prohibiting murder means to prohibit yourself from becoming murderous. The sin of murder is rooted in passion, and to extirpate the sin of murder from your life means to pull it out, spiritual root and all.

It's not enough to avoid adultery. If you want to fulfill the law prohibiting adultery, you have to look at yourself before you look lustfully at someone else, and you must ask yourself what has happened to you – you as a spouse or partner or you as a single person – that keeps you from being satisfied with the sexual life you have now. The sin of adultery, Jesus is saying, is rooted in the heart, not in the groin, and if you want to rid yourself of that sin, rid yourself first of the inordinate desire that issues in it.

And so on, down the list. Jesus takes the old law and he imbues it with a new and radical meaning – something old, something new, the way of the Christ.

We know that we're going to have to follow Jesus on the path of the old and the new if we're to remain faithful to his way and if we're to survive as a community of faith. We know, for example, that we're going to have to bring forward the best of the old and try it in a new way. When church school starts again next month, we're going to try a format that's both old and new. Most Sundays, our young people will be in church school during worship, but on Communion Sundays and other important occasions during the church year, they'll be here in worship with everyone else. We'll still be teaching them the old, old story of God's love for the world that Jesus showed us, but we'll do it in a new way and a different new way if that approach doesn't work and yet another if neither of those approaches work. Something old, something new.

Finally, I want to close today and bid you all adieu for a couple of weeks by telling you what I'll be doing with my summer vacation and why.

Here's what I'll be doing – visiting more of Ohio's 88 county courthouses. Those of you in the back may not be able to see the handsome book I'm holding up, but it's a beautiful picture book of all 88 of Ohio's county courthouses. The Wilsons gave me this book eight years ago, when I set out on this project, and I've now visited 58 of our state's courthouses. People have asked me over the years why I'm doing this, and the answer's pretty straightforward: something old, something new.

Many of our courthouses embody a type of monumental civic architecture that no longer exists. They're like the paintings of the Old Masters. Those buildings were built at the height of county pride, and we will never enjoy that historical period again. As a culture we don't seem to take pride in much of anything anymore, but we once did, and I can see that kinder, gentler, more civic-minded America in many of our courthouses. There is much to see of the good ol' days in our courthouses if you know where to look.

At the same time, all of my courthouse trips are land voyages of discovery for me,

since each courthouse is unique, and getting to it means getting off the drearily familiar interstate and following the old federal routes and then the state routes, and finally the main streets of the county seat, all of which is new to me. Courthouse Square in Medina is completely different from Courthouse Square in Bryan, and discovering those differences and what they mean to the people who live with them is new every time I park the car. I pull up to something grand and old, and I discover something new, every single time. I can already feel the sadness when I'll have visited courthouse number 88.

Friends, I leave you today and for the next two Sundays with something to think about while I'm gone. The older I get, the more I'm convinced that the most important virtue for a Christian is not love, it's poise. It's the exercise of that kind and gentle wisdom we hear across the centuries from the Teacher in Jerusalem: knowing the time to love and to hate, the time to heed and the time to ignore, the time to approach and the time to withdraw. Achieving and maintaining that balance – that poise – is what gets us successfully and gracefully through this world and into the world to come. Jesus's words to his followers is for us to learn from him when to hold firm to something old and when to welcome with joy something new. That's Christian poise, and it works. Try it for yourself.