

**WHEN SOMETHING OLD BECOMES SOMETHING NEW; MATTHEW 31-33, 44-52;
JULY 30, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

“Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” With that concluding phrase to this major section of Matthew’s gospel on the parables of Jesus’ Matthew with the subtlety of Alfred Hitchcock, inserts himself with a cameo appearance in his documentary on the life of Jesus.

Matthew, of course, is the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven; a master of the household – the church – in Jerusalem, a congregation of Jews.

Matthew brings out of his treasure what is old and new – his gospel is packaged in language and imagery his congregation would recognize: Jesus is the new Moses, the sermon on the Mount is Moses giving the law from Mt. Sinai; Jesus himself says to the assembled crowds on the mount that he has come not to change one jot or title of the law but to fulfill the law in something new – his life, death and resurrection.

How to keep faith alive and relevant and yet grounded and durable? This is the problem Matthew faces, we all face in living lives guided by any religion, philosophy or set of principles worthy of the name. If our faith fails to remain fresh and new it becomes a dead letter, rubble scattered across the past, useless to the present.

On Monday, we heard Linda Greenhouse the Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* reporter assigned to the Supreme Court for forty years. In describing the composition of the court, she explained that Justice Clarence Thomas is what is known as “an originalist” meaning his interpretation of the law is taken strictly and only from the perspective of the 18th century framers of the Constitution. Originalists consider the law ‘fixed’ in the time and context in which it was first codified.

The problem with originalism is that it is static and unable to accommodate the evolution of society in social norms, technology, institutional life and politics and becomes a dead letter.

The same happens with religion. Philip Larkin, a British poet, in his poem “Church Going” describes being on a mid-week bike ride and stopping to walk through an empty country church.

“Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,/And always end much at a loss like this,/Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,/When churches fall completely out of use/What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep/A few cathedrals chronically on show,/Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,/And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.”

A sobering image – when religion ceases to be new. Larkin’s 1938 poem resonates today when not a few churches have slipped, for all intents and purposes, rent-free to rain and sheep. I read Larkin’s poem now and then to remind myself of the fate of any institution when the refrain, ‘We never did it that way before’ is used as a foil to change.

But when old and new are woven together faith or philosophy or art comes alive. In 1903, another poet, Ezra Pound made a statement that became the rallying cry for a new school of poetry after centuries of iambic pentameter. The cry was “Make It New.” It was Pound’s declaration of war on the ossified formulas of 19th century cadence and rhyme that had fizzled into trivial sentiment.

Pound’s “Make It New” unleashed a century of experimentation in free verse, blank verse, narrative, imagist, and surrealist poetry. Yet, Pound did not abandon classical themes of poetry – in a famous letter to William Carlos Williams he bids Williams come to Europe, to the home of German philosophy and Greek tragedy to find subject matter for his poetry.

But Williams in a famous passage of his epic poem *Patterson* records verbatim an 1879 geological survey of an artesian well in Patterson, NJ as if to say North America, this seedy industrial town, has as much depth and substance as the literary traditions of Europe. Williams drills deep into the history of America with his experimental forms and a new poetry gushes forth; he combines new and old and becomes the headwater of modern American verse.

This is what Jesus calls for today; he gives us the image of a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven and master of the household; set against Matthew’s apocalyptic imagery and reference to evil, the scribe could be a highly trained special forces leader. There is no privileging of old or new. We are to embrace both, to love what has been received and to be ready to embrace what is yet to be given.

The treasure chest the scribe draws from is God’s revelation. Revealed truth of the past – as in the story of God’s people as recorded in the bible; a six thousand year journey in which a people sensed their call to establish a new land where they would live according to codes of conduct that affirmed life.

And the revealed truth of the present – as in myriad ways the Spirit comes to us in a vision or dream, in a hymn verse, or a door that opens or one that closes and offers the voice and guidance of a truth larger than us for navigating some perilous road or decision. This is finding a familiar and ancient God in a new and perhaps even surprising way.

The parables comparing the kingdom of God to a mustard seed or yeast convey the expansiveness of the kingdom of God. We are not to be deceived by the church’s modest resources God will use them and us to accomplish God’s mission.

The parables of treasure buried in the field and the pearl of great value remind us of the singular devotion and sacrifice the kingdom requires – once we taste or even suspect where abundant life is to be found we go to any length to find it. Doing so takes precedence over prudence and caution.

Living under the reign of God re-orders our priorities, frees us to take risks.

Finally, the parable of the net sets the other parables in the context of apocalypse. All kinds of fish are gathered – edible and non-edible.

Good and evil will be sorted out. The exercise of discipleship – bible study, service, worship, and living in community is not a game of ‘let’s pretend’ or wouldn’t it be nice but a matter of life and death.

Jesus' parables breathe life into the old faith. Matthew equips his congregation with a healthy perspective on the new and old at a critical transition in the early church; they are Jews yet their lives had been touched by the Holy Spirit: old wounds bound up, new purpose given, life rediscovered as possibility, hope, and abundance.

So Matthew is saying on the one hand, "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water," the story of God's people, the mission and calling of our ancestors Abraham and Sarah is still our story; but we are now the authors of the new story – the presence of this ancient, living God in our lives.

If the two are untethered we run the risk of becoming either Larkin's deserted country parish or like the new experimental poetry of the 20th century – lost in the deconstruction of language, of interest to an esoteric few, failing to uplift and inspire.

When it comes to our faith, the stakes, Matthew says, are life and death. I find his advice particularly compelling for Westminster. We are a church that embraces progressive values but stands firm in traditional worship, in a traditional building.

Do we do this perfectly? No. Sometimes I worry that we are overly attracted to scholars who strip the bible and faith of its grandeur and mystery; thinkers and writers who look back on the history of the church through the lens of higher criticism and tell us how crude and unenlightened they were, how oppressive and outmoded biblical tenets and traditional Christianity.

Yet, I also fret over our diminishing attention span, our over-scheduled lives, our being re-directed away from one another toward online content and consumer opportunities. David Brooks calls this the culture of the Big Me but it is also the 'shrinking of me' – of my value and worth as a human being, my relationships and commitments traded for a IV drip through a small screen of endless information often with little or no lasting value.

Chris Sharen, the widely respected researcher and statistician who heads Auburn's Center for the Study of Theological Education said to me last May that a mainline, progressive congregation like ours occupies a critical space in the religious landscape and wider culture.

"You attract young people raised in an era of culture wars, terrorism, technological revolution and the reordering of the economy; they seek authenticity and practical values, yet your base is older member raised when going to church on Sunday morning was the norm and translating biblical values into everyday living was called Christian commitment and life style."

It is a challenge he said to occupy this space. You have to meet a variety of often opposed expectations. Time is not on your side. But neither are you fighting the losing battle of creating a community that is returning to the past nor one that has sold its soul to tepid secularism. Chris went on to say that I should write a book about Westminster – that the mainline Christian church needs voices, examples, encouragement to forge the new and the old in ministry grounded in biblical values that impacts the community and improves lives.

It would be nice to write a book, but it is more important to envision how the new and old speak to us today, are calling us to engage the world with the voice of the saints and the power of the prophets in 21st century and not just in Buffalo but in other places around the world because we are a smaller and smaller global village.

Of course, within a generation of Matthew's church they would be beyond the synagogues and reaching out to gentiles across the Mediterranean world, inviting them to join in this community of faith started long ago by Abraham and Sarah but finding new forms of expression because of a man called Jesus.

That watershed moment in the early church equates perhaps with the ordaining of gay and lesbian people to Christian ministry as well as affirming and celebrating same sex marriages. It is not quite the same, but the monumental shift in our perspective on human sexuality roughly compares with the lifting of kosher law and requirements to enter the Christian church.

That's what we're challenged with today – re-inventing ourselves in ways that bring the good news of Jesus Christ to a world that looks almost nothing like it did a generation ago let alone 2,000 years ago but still suffers the same oppression, injustice and despair.

It was never easy for – for St. Augustine when the empire was falling and the civilized world seemed to be disappearing; or for Luther when the church he loved seemed to have sold out to greed and power; or for a generation of men and women who had 'come out' about their sexuality but found the doors of the church closed to them.

Translating the gospel into those worlds at those moments of history relied on God's revelation – God's opening pathways and opportunities and new partnerships; and it relied on people who were willing to give up everything for the sake of the freedom and liberation of following Jesus. All of it required great sacrifice – like selling everything to buy a plot of land with a buried treasure.

These are exciting times; far removed from 'let's pretend' or 'wouldn't it be nice if....' The decisions we make will lead to death or life.

In the 1960s when I was confirmed there's no way I could have imagined the challenges we face today. In fact, my theological world view would have been unable to respond to and affirm the significant changes in church and society since the late 20th century. I suspect the same could be said of many of us; in other words we've changed over the years – hopefully for a better, more just, more enlightened faith.

Samuel VanVranken Holmes after whom this chapel is named set the bar for us – in an age that denounced evolution and immigrants he preached the compatibility of Darwin and Jesus; and he founded the third settlement house in America on our East Side then swarming with European immigrants hoping to start a better life in this country.

This is our time, our moment to be the church where else would we rather be? +