

Treasures Old and New

The gospel text that Brian read for us today has a whole series of mini-parables, parables of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like ... a mustard seed, ... yeast, ... a treasure, ... a net thrown into the sea. Jesus concludes the series by saying, "Therefore 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."

Jesus is pointing to two things here: both that the kingdom of heaven is a treasure, something of immeasurable worth; and that the kingdom of heaven is something that is both new and old. That it involves the ancient promises of God, God's word spoken through the prophets across the eons—that's the old part; but that God's promises were being fulfilled in surprising new ways.

So treasures, treasures old and new.

Don and I are currently living our own story of treasures old and new. In December we moved to a new home. Well, new to us: the house is actually 110 years old, and it is a treasure. And it's not really true to say the house is new to us: it's the house that Don grew up in, along with his sister Peggy, and their other siblings. It's the house that my mother-in-law lived in for almost 60 years.

Now it is our new home. This 110 year old house has many old features that we treasure: high ceilings, wood trim around the doorways and windows, wood floors, a screened veranda—tons of character. Our new-old house also benefited from some modernizations introduced by my parents-in-law, including a large set of windows in the kitchen eating area, that look out over the garden: it's a highlight of the house.

Now, our house also lacks some of the newer features we had come to value in our previous home: an en suite bathroom, air conditioning. Our challenge over the past six months has been how to live in this mix of new and old, and at the same time make this distinctively *our* home.

This sometimes takes a funny turn, in that this has been the Seaton family home for so long. Now, whenever Don's siblings are visiting around the kitchen table, someone will inevitably look up to see the time on the cuckoo clock on the far wall—except the cuckoo clock isn't there anymore, in the place it had hung for decades.

What living in this house for the past six months has taught us is the value of the old: there are original features of the house that we treasure and would never want to change. We've also learned

that traditionally built houses don't really need air conditioning, and that they're not really set up to accommodate en suites. We've adjusted some of our expectations, and let the house have its say on those things.

We've also learned to love the newer features of our home, too, those changes that Don's parents made to accommodate their growing family. To make the house our own, we are undertaking some renovations in the coming months—please pray for us. We'll put our stamp on things, but in a way that is in conversation with the older and newer parts of our home.

Treasures old and new. One of the courses I took in my studies at Duke was a course in strategy. We looked at the question of, how does the church—this ancient institution with a lot of history, we might even say baggage—how does the church continue to be in conversation with the world around us?

One of the concepts that our teachers shared with us was the notion of “traditioned innovation,” bringing together *tradition* (the old) and *innovation* (the new). The concept of traditioned innovation is a modern way of describing what Jesus is teaching in our gospel text, the pattern of bringing out of our treasure what is new and what is old.

As it is applied to the church, traditioned innovation seeks to find a way to remain tethered, rooted, moored to something richer, deeper, wider than just what our contemporary world offers us. It acknowledges that our current thinking and current practices are enriched by drawing from the vast well of tradition,

even those parts of it that seem inconveniently old-fashioned to us (like a lack of air conditioning!). That there is great wisdom in our tradition, if we would only let it speak.

At the same time, the innovation word reminds us not to get stuck in tradition, not to let it become fixed and rigid, and cause our thinking and practices to become fixed and rigid as well. The innovation word reminds us that even in the pages of Scripture God is always disrupting God's own plans! God's purposes, God's goals, God's *mission* doesn't change; but God's methods are always changing, in ways that we could never foresee or imagine.

This is the very tension that is at the heart of the gospel: the core purpose, the core mission, doesn't change. It's always about the fulfillment of God's ancient promises. It's always about God's unremitting love for the world, and God's desire to reconcile the world to himself. It's always about God's relentless desire for a world of justice, in which God's little ones are lifted up, and the last shall be first.

How God does that changes: he calls the patriarchs and matriarchs; he chooses Israel, and frees them from captivity in Egypt; he calls prophets who challenged rulers; he sends a Son born in a stable, killed on a cross, and raised to life again.

Treasures, treasures old and new.

The challenge for the church is to live with this tension. In the United Church, our problem is not that we are stuck in tradition in the way that is

usually understood. In fact, I argue in my thesis that part of our problem is that we have become unmoored, untethered, uprooted from the riches, the treasures of our wider, deeper, Christian tradition.

Still, we do have our own traditions that can be problematic. Even in our non-traditional denomination, we know the power of the words, “we’ve never done it that way before.” We too have developed habits, practices, ways of thinking that have become sacred cows to us, no longer open to innovation.

Even our non-traditional beliefs have become traditional for us, protected and insulated from an encounter with the living word that disrupts our settled patterns and shows the way to God’s innovation. There’s more than one way for us to become stuck in tradition!

The challenge, the task for us is to find a way to retrieve or recover a healthy connection to the treasures of our tradition: the kinds of things that we do when we gather here each Sunday, through the prayers and the singing, the sacraments and Scripture, through an encounter with the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ, the living God.

And then to let those things speak, deeply, to our current lives and realities. There is living power, living power, in all of these things—these traditions, these treasures of the church. Perhaps that’s one reason why we are so determined sometimes to be rid of them, to escape the claim they make upon our lives. But perhaps it’s only when we can embrace the old, when we can love the tradition, that we are really able to experience anew the power of our faith.

I mentioned earlier God’s core purpose and mission. It’s the church’s task to be a participant in God’s mission, to place ourselves in the service of God’s mission. To proclaim God’s promises: good news to the poor; release to the captives; recovery of sight to the blind; freedom for the oppressed; justice for all. To fulfill our purpose we need to be well enough rooted in our tradition that we can discern what God’s call to us today looks like.

One of the gifts our church has is our openness to the new. As part of the liberal Protestant tradition, the United Church of Canada has been at the forefront of many movements for social justice in recent decades, including seeking reconciliation with First Nations peoples, embracing the full participation of LGBTQ people in our church, and focussing on the care of God’s creation.

All of these movements, I believe, are movements of the Holy Spirit; they are ways in which God’s ancient promises are being fulfilled in surprising new ways: voices from the margins preaching in our pulpits, God’s little ones lifted up, shalom—wholeness—for the whole groaning creation.

These are some of the new treasures that we rightly celebrate. But sometimes we celebrate these new treasures in a way that sets them in opposition to our older treasures.

Sometimes our embrace of social justice is entwined with a rejection of our deeper, older traditions, as though the two don’t belong together, as though the embrace of social justice replaces our earlier concern with doctrines, dogmas,

and beliefs. As though this new movement of the Spirit is a new and improved way of being church, and we can now jettison all the old stuff.

My thesis argues that this is a mistake; that these things actually belong together, that the one is rooted in the other; that tradition is the source that empowers our actions for justice. Traditioned innovation says the same thing; that the two belong together in a healthy tension; that without tradition, innovation becomes mere novelty or fad, or worse a kind of ideological correctness.

But before I said it, and before my teachers said, Jesus said it: the kingdom of heaven is a world where God's ancient promises take new and surprising form. Treasures old and new. Our wholeness as a congregation, our wholeness as individual Christians, depends on being able to hold the two together.

In a moment we will sing a song about our participation in God's mission, the ways that we will join our present day efforts to God's ancient promises, as a sign of our confidence in God's future.

The song reminds me of our congregation's motto, "A community learning to love like Jesus." It's a reminder that we are not a community of the perfect—perfect people or perfect Christians—but that we are instead a group of people struggling to be faithful; and that as we participate in God's mission we ourselves are healed and transformed.

But first, let us pray:¹

Lord, we give you thanks for the gift of the past that has been delivered to us by your saints. Thanks for Scripture, a word we did not devise but one that we receive; thanks for the memory of the saints, models from the past for our lives today; thanks for your church, an institution we did not create, our home in troubled times, our rock in the storm, our teacher unto wisdom.

We give you thanks that you have not left us to be victims of the tyranny of the present—that through the past you give us a wider view, a longer perspective than we would have if we had only our limited experience.

At the same time, Lord, we also thank you that you grace our lives with new insights, fresh beginnings, and lively revelation. You enliven our present by breaking in with your future.

For what is past, for what is to come, for today in all its potential and promise, we give thanks. For your word spoken to us in the past, made real and relevant to us in the present, we give thanks. Enable us to live expectantly and obediently so we can take what has been given in the past, live it in the present, and walk with you in the future. Amen.

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¹ Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*.