

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Proper 12, Year A, July 30, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Something Old and Something New”
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

In the early 1970s, there was a group of teenagers who had grown up together in church. They had been in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and Youth Group together, but by age 15 they were losing interest in church. Everything about it was for their parents' generation—the clothes they were expected to wear, the music, the sermons (boring). All the activities of church were geared for another age group, and it didn't speak to them.

Fortunately for them, right at that time, a new minister came to their church. He was much younger than previous ones, and he took an interest in them like no previous ministers had. He didn't try to fit them into the church as it was, but tried to meet them on their own ground. He got to know them, to learn what interested them, and helped them to discover what their own faith really was.

This young minister began challenging them: to read things they hadn't read before, to watch films that made them think, and to discuss issues deeply. It was a suburban church, so he got them involved in inner city ministries, with people who had grown up very differently than they had. He took them on retreats to the lake, where they could try their own kind of worship. He even invited them to go along with him, one or two at a time, on nursing home and hospital pastoral calls. As you might imagine, these activities opened up whole new experiences of faith for these young people.

There was one thing that was still a stumbling block for them—the Bible. Back then the Revised Standard Version was in use, and while it was not as archaic in language as the King James Bible, it still retained the 'thees' and 'thys,' the old pronouns, for addressing God. That was particularly difficult for them as they tried to relate to God in prayer. They wanted to learn to pray, not in someone else's language, but in their own everyday speech.

The young minister recognized this problem and worked on it by ordering a set of paperback books for them with a new, contemporary translation of the

Psalms; it was called *Psalms / Now*. It was a translation that not only used the kind of language these young people used to speak to each other, it also had colorful artwork in it. They weren't paintings of a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, the kind that they were used to seeing in their Sunday School illustrations, but joyful, abstract splashes of color by the artist Sister Mary Corita Kent, a Roman Catholic nun. They also had posters of her inspirational artwork on the walls of their Youth room, and even the young minister had some of them hanging on the walls in his office.

The old translation had lines like this from Psalm 130 "O lord, let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication." This is beautiful and poetic, like Shakespeare, but it is not a prayer that makes sense to a 15 year old trying to relate personally to God. The new translation had instead, simply, "O God, hear my prayer." It was the exact same message, but in a language of prayer they could relate to and use in their own prayers. Learning to pray to God in their own ways, on top of all of the new experiences of faith they were having, helped them discover a faith that was alive and meaningful to them; a faith they could own, and live with, and continue to grow in, for the rest of their lives.

And I really wonder what would have happened to those young people if that young minister had not come to their church when he did. I expect that many of them might have left the church and their faith behind. So many young people, even when they have been raised in the church, do leave it behind if it does not ever speak to their lives in ways that make sense to them.

Many years later, one of these young people went on to go to seminary, and I expect by now you may have figured out that I was one of the young people in that church. It was only later, in studying the Bible closely, that I discovered where that young minister had learned how to relate to me and my friends. It wasn't something he'd thought up for himself; he'd gotten it from a higher authority, from Jesus himself. In fact, he'd gotten it from the very parable that ends our Gospel reading today, the one that says, "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." The young minister was well aware that he was training these young people to be something like scribes for the kingdom of heaven. He knew that he had to connect them to the old and great treasure of the faith, but in new ways, not in old ways.

This is a powerful lesson for us in all that we do in church, especially during this interim time as we prepare for your new Rector. I expect that your new Rector will be younger than either David or I, and I expect that he or she will undoubtedly bring in some new changes.

Our treasure of faith is great, and it is very old. It is not only old in that the Bible was written a long time ago and that Jesus walked on earth a long time ago. It is also old to every new generation who comes along, because it is the faith of their parents until it becomes their own faith. Our job is to find the new ways of expressing our great treasure, so that the young people growing up in our church now can make it their own. One day it will be up to them to discover new ways of expressing that same great treasure, so that the next generation behind them can, in turn, can make it their own faith. It is only by this continual effort of making the new out of what is old that the great treasure of our faith becomes alive and meaningful for each successive generation. Be like the scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven; be like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new.