

SERMON
July 27, 2007
“The new and the old”
By the Rev. Bill Fulton

Once I had a parishioner who was unhappy with the new Prayer Book. He complained to me about all the changes in the Episcopal Church and he said, “The world is changing too fast. The Church ought to be the one place that doesn’t change.”

I sympathized with him because sometimes it seem like everything is changing. The only thing that stays constant is change. We’ve seen enormous changes in the economy and the type of jobs that we have, changes in technology that just never seem to stop, changes in medical care that are beneficial but also very confusing.

When I look at the Church today, I see a struggle about change. Some people say, “The church is changing too quickly!” And others say, “The Church isn’t changing quickly enough!”

Some people say, “We have to hold onto the traditional teachings of the Church.” Others say, “No, the Gospel imperative is for us to reach out and be more inclusive and offer a radical hospitality to everyone. We have to be a prophetic Church.”

How do we decide whether change is good or not?

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells this parable. "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."

In my imagination, I see an old man whose son is about to leave home for his first long journey. The old man goes to a big chest and pulls out two things. He hands the first one to his son and says, “This is the knife my father gave to me when I went on my first journey. Keep it as a reminder of your family’s heritage and always remember to keep us proud of you.” Then he hands him a bag and say, “Your mother just made this bag. Bring it back with something from your journey that is meaningful to you.”

Something new and something old. Jesus says that a wise person has some of each.

Let me tell you a story about something new and something old. There’s a small Native Alaskan village in Southeast Alaska near where Katy and I used to live. This village was very traditional and had almost no contact with white people until the 1910 or so. The Salvation Army and the Presbyterians established churches there, but they were fairly tolerant of the native customs. Then in about 1970 a new church came to town, and the preacher in the new church told them that their traditional dances and regalia was un-Christian. He got some of them to stop the dances and burn their regalia. This was the beginning of a low point in the town’s history. In the 1980’s they had the most teen suicides in the nation. They were so shocked that the elders got together and said, “We have to do something.”

They did a number of things. Some of them started asking the elders about the old days in the village. They asked them to tell the old stories that were almost forgotten. They started the peacemaking circle, which was a way of talking out a problem by telling stories to each other. They started making their regalia again, and they did the traditional dances. They looked for new resources and help from other villages. In short, they started taking pride in their heritage once more. And as they did, the village got stronger. The suicide rate went down. Alcoholism was reduced. And they began to be a healthy village again.

They had to reach back to move forward. They had to ground themselves in the past in order to move into the future. As Jesus said, they had to bring out of their treasure what was old and what was new.

It seems to me that Jesus is saying that we need to change, but our change needs to be rooted in the past, in our heritage. Jesus himself was a faithful Jew born into a faithful Jewish family. But he wanted to renew the Jewish faith and internalize the external demands of the religion. He said, "I came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." (Matthew 5:17)

The New Testament doesn't cancel out the Old Testament, but it completes it and fulfills it and broadens it. You might say that Jesus' treasure is the Hebrew scripture, and Jesus brings out of this treasure both what is old and what is new.

If you think of conservatives as these who conserve the past, and liberals as those who strive to bring in new things, then we need both conservatives and liberals to give us a balance. We take out of our treasure both what is old and what is new.

In fact, each one of us is a combination of the old and the new. We all grow up hearing the stories of our family and we're shaped by our families. Our character, our values, and our expectations are given to us by our families. But each us is an individual as well. We bring something new and unique to our character.

As Episcopalians, we cherish our Anglican heritage – the centrality of Christ, the wisdom in the Creeds, the importance of the Eucharist, the beautiful words of the prayer book, our appreciation of the beauty and thought and comprehensiveness, and a deep spirituality with room for wonder, awe and mystery.

Our Anglican tradition is very important to us. But there's a difference between tradition and traditionalism. The theologian Jaroslav Pelikan said that tradition is the living faith of the dead, while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. What he meant was that a living tradition keeps in conversation with the past while living in the present. Traditionalism is worshiping the past by insisting that we simply repeat old formulas, even when they don't work any more.

What we want to do is keep ourselves rooted firmly in our heritage while at the same time finding new solutions that are faithful to the past.

I don't know exactly how the Episcopal Church will find its way through its current controversies. But I do have faith that if we are true to our Anglican identity, we'll find a way.