

“Ancient Contemporary Church,” Communion Meditation, Matthew 13:44-52, Brett Younger, Lake Shore Baptist Church, February 4, 2018

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid: then with joy the finder goes and sells everything and buys that field.*

*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who finding one pearl of great value, went and sold everything and bought it.*

*Again, the kingdom is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.*

*So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?”*

*They answered, “Yes.”*

*And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom is like a householder who brings out of the treasury what is new and what is old.”*

Coming back to Lake Shore after seventeen years of looking for a church as wonderful as Lake Shore is such fun. I confess that I am not always completely certain what is new, what is old, and what I have forgotten. I am grateful to those of you who look exactly like you did twenty years ago—that would be you, Libby Bellinger. I apologize to those who are new to Lake Shore, but who I have inexplicably pretended to know.

The fortunate people who have been here forever are the exception to what is increasingly the rule. Many of us cannot imagine what twenty years in the same church feels like. I have been a member of thirteen churches, which suggests I have problems.

We have, as a group, been in thousands of churches. We have been to churches that smell like incense, and churches that smell like Starbucks; churches where during the welcome they hug ten people and say, “God loves you and I do, too” and churches where no one has hugged in years; churches with kneeling and genuflecting, and churches with clapping and dancing; churches where the preacher stands in a 400 year old pulpit that looks like it should be in a castle, and churches where the preacher stands in a spotlight that looks like it should be in a Netflix special; churches where they chant everything and churches with painfully redundant choruses—one word, two notes, ten minutes; churches where they only quote white men who died 500 years ago, and churches where they discuss the theological implications of *The Shape of Water*; churches where every prayer is printed, and churches where every prayer is tweeted; churches where Wednesday night supper starts at 5:15 and is still six dollars, and churches where the only supper they share is the gluten-free non-allergen body of Christ with a pinot noir; churches where the Senior Pastor is a male, and churches where they cannot remember their

last male Senior Pastor; churches that hope tomorrow will be 1998, and churches that stay away from anything older than they are. We come from churches with great love for the old and churches enamored with whatever is new.

Jesus' advice is to take the best of the old and the new: "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of the treasury what is new and what is old."

Matthew says something in this verse about his own understanding of the gospel. This collection of stories begins with the Parable of the Sower and ends with these brief passages on the kingdom as treasure, pearl, and net. The parables are familiar and unfamiliar.

Matthew is bringing out treasures new and old. His approach throughout his gospel is to combine the new word of Jesus with the old word of the ancient tradition. Matthew presents the new teaching, new community, and new mission. At the same time, Matthew retains the old—the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophetic words, and the hopes of Israel.

Matthew does not simply place the new and the old alongside one another so that we can choose between them. He weaves the two together so that neither the new nor the old can stand without the other. The stories of Jesus as an infant make no sense if you take out the references to the Old Testament. The Sermon on the Mount is about the fulfillment of the old law. If you remove the old, then Matthew's Gospel falls apart. If you remove the new, then no Gospel remains (Beverly Gaventa, "Both the New and the Old," *Christian Century*).

When we read Matthew's story—or any New Testament writing—the absolute necessity of both old and new is obvious. But what is easy to recognize in the text is more difficult as we move from scripture to the church. The new and the old have a longstanding, ongoing battle in the church.

The churches in which I grew up loved the old. One churchgoer put it: "This is what I learned at First Baptist Church. I learned that unleavened bread is Chicklet-sized soda crackers. I learned that the moneychangers at the temple were communists, not capitalists. I learned that sharpened pew pencil is an oxymoron. I learned that every passage of scripture has three points. I learned that Sunday school teachers have an unlimited supply of construction paper, Elmer's glue, and Popsicle sticks."

Those churches recognized the value of the old. We were serious about the ancient words. We had dog-eared Bibles with multi-colored underlining and sermon notes scribbled in the margin. We taped memory verses to our mirrors, refrigerators, and baby beds.

We took sin seriously. The church warned us about the dangers of worldliness and the hypnotic glitter of having, doing, and thinking what the sinful crowd has, does, and thinks. Churches that loved the old loved people like me into the church.

There are so many good things about churches that love the old that it takes a while to realize that crucial things are missing. We memorized Bible verses, but

none of those verses were about our responsibility to feed the hungry. Our stand against worldliness degenerated into a short list of taboos. In terms of sins that matter—racism, sexism, individualism, materialism, and homophobia—we were no different from those outside the church.

We built walls that kept people out. We were not nearly as inclusive as the Christ we claimed to follow. The old ways alone are not nearly enough, because God calls us in new, surprising ways.

Other churches adore the new. They look for people where they are—instead of where they used to be. They use technology to reach out to those who have never been part of the church. They take on today's issues, today's problems, and today's hopes.

There is, of course, danger in this opposite direction. We have been to churches that love only the new. They can be fun. It is fun to sing without a hymnal. It is fun to watch clips from *I Tonya* that illuminate the story of David and Goliath. It is fun to hear sermons with titles like, "How to Be Happy," "How to Have a Happy Marriage," "How to Have Happy Children," and "How to Have Happy Children Who will Have Happy Marriages."

Churches that love only the new can be so much fun that it takes a while to realize that they often miss the sacred. When you clap for God like you clap for a pop star, then you may not be taking God seriously. In churches that love the new, there is often no silence that points to an unspeakable God, no confession that admits our unworthiness, and no word that hints at the unexplainable Mystery.

Churches that love the excitement of the new can be hard for people dealing with a tragedy. One Sunday after worship, I was shaking hands at the back and a visitor to Lake Shore told me the name of the church of which she was a member. It's a congregation in Waco that loves the new.

I asked, "Why are you visiting Lake Shore?"

She said: "I'm going through a divorce and a friend at my church suggested I come here for a while."

Some days you do not feel like waving your arms.

Elton Trueblood called ours a cut-flower civilization, clipped from our roots. Without roots, we have little staying power. The new ways alone are not enough.

Sometimes we suffer from an illness Baylor professor Beverly Gaventa calls "traditio-phobia." Victims have a prejudice against anything that is old. New is good and old is bad. If my parents like it, there must be something wrong with it. Anything that smacks of home is not worthy of our new enlightened state. "Traditio-phobia" takes a dim view of the old things in the household's treasures, always preferring to start over.

At other times we suffer from an illness that might be called "innovatio-phobia." Victims have a prejudice against anything that is new. The old things are the good things. We grow so in love with our old opinions that we make them the standard by which all others are judged—"I have made up my mind and have no

room for new information.” “Innovatio-phobia” takes a dim view of the new things in the household’s treasures, preferring the safety of the old.

The wise person treasures the old and the new. The open-minded know it is not either/or. It is both/and. We read the new by an old light. We see the old in a light that is new each day.

Some of the best parts of this good church are old. Lake Shore holds to the central truths of the ancient story. The old is an essential part of who we are. There are bits and pieces of Lake Shore’s 59 year history that can’t be lost without diminishing the church. The treasures of the kingdom are old.

Some of the best parts of this church are new. Lake Shore is open to new ideas, new visions, and new ways of living the gospel. Some mercies have to be gathered new each morning. One of this church’s gifts is the ability to address what’s unexpected and discover that the treasures of the kingdom are new.

We need to choose wisely what is best of the ancient and the contemporary, because we are always standing at the end of something old and the beginning of something new. You and I carry all kinds of gifts and burdens from our parents, culture, and churches. We have a collection of values and ideas that we have picked up along the way. We chose some of those values ourselves. Others were pushed on us when we were not looking. We spend our lives deciding what to keep.

At times, the church is tempted to throw everything out and start over from scratch, but much of what is old is worth keeping. At other times the church wants to hold tightly to everything, but some old things are not worth keeping.

The question isn’t “Is it old or new?” The question is “Does it come from God?” God will help us choose what to keep and what to throw away, what to accept and what to reject, as we learn that God’s treasures are ageless. We come to this ancient table to share the mercy that is new each day. We live in gratitude for what has been and hope for what will be.