

**“OLD AND NEW TREASURE”**  
**2 Corinthians 9:6-8; Matthew 13:51-53**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**November 10, 2019**

While looking at a church-related website this past week, I came across a list of “some things you will just never hear.” Have you ever seen one of those lists? “On tonight’s news, we have nothing but good and uplifting stories to report.” Or maybe you’ve seen a list of comments the pastor of a local church is never likely to hear. “Pastor, I just love singing hymns we’ve never sung before.” “I think the temperature in the sanctuary was just right for everyone today.” “Pastor, would you consider letting me be the permanent teacher for the middle school class?” “Hey, it’s my turn to sit on the front row.” And then there’s the comment a pastor is least likely to hear from a church member: “Pastor, I hope you’ll do that 10-week stewardship sermon series again this year!”

The fact is that teachings about stewardship are all over the Bible, and they appear in our lectionary readings quite frequently. But just for the record, it’s been my custom to preach only one official stewardship sermon per year. I always preach it a week prior to our annual pledge Sunday, and this is it! There will be no sermon series; just this one sermon!

Predictably, the Gospel reading I’ve chosen contains the word “treasure,” but it’s not really about treasure in the literal sense – that is, our money and what God expects us to do with it. Here in Matthew 13, Jesus has just told a series of seven parables about the kingdom of heaven. For this Evangelist, the term “kingdom of heaven” refers not to an afterlife in the next world, but to a new age of divine rule in this world. The other Gospel writers refer to this new reality not as the kingdom of heaven but as the kingdom of God. Jesus frequently uses parables to describe what the kingdom is like. Here he asks his disciples if they grasp the meaning of these particular parables, and the disciples reply that they do.

No doubt Jesus is pleased with their understanding, but he tacks on another parable to make sure his disciples see all of the parables in proper perspective. Some of these stories and images are in circulation prior to Jesus’ time and are familiar to his hearers. However, Jesus puts his own stamp upon these existing parables, and, in other cases, creates altogether new ones. His parables contain material that is already part of the Jewish tradition as well as material that is unique to Jesus himself.

To illustrate this, he has us imagine the master of a household pulling out some of his prized belongings from a storage room, perhaps to show to a guest in his home. Jesus tells us that the householder “brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 12:52b). If you were to do this in your own home, you might reveal to your guest your new overcoat for the wintertime and an heirloom quilt made by your grandmother. Jesus says that his parables are like this – they contain elements that are new and elements that are old. His point is that both have value.

This strikes me as a helpful perspective, because many people today have a tendency to appreciate either what is new or what is old, but not both at the same time. In 2007, I moved to the Northeast from Houston, Texas. I’m often struck by the contrasts between a huge, modern

metropolis like Houston and a small, charming New England town like Woodbury. Houston is full of entrepreneurs and builders, and has few zoning regulations to control their ambitions. If one of them decides to build a strip center or an office tower, he or she easily gets permission to tear down an existing structure to make way for the new project. Most of the buildings in Houston are younger than I am; new is the norm. By contrast, Woodbury is committed to preserving old, historic buildings, and it takes an Act of Congress to get the go-ahead to build a Dollar General store! The most valued and valuable structures around here are often those that are two hundred years old. What this signifies is that the priorities of the two communities are very different. One values progress at all costs; the other values tradition at all costs. I've come to the conclusion that each has something to learn from the other. Why should communities be forced to make an either/or choice? When we show our guests what we have to offer, why not bring out of our treasure what is new and what is old?

Two weeks from today, we as a church will be celebrating and dedicating our refurbished sanctuary. It makes sense that we will be highlighting the features to our worship space which are new – a high tech audio-visual system, more powerful ceiling fans, and fresh carpeting. But much of the work we have done has also been focused on preserving what is old, such as the pews and pulpit chairs on which we sit every Sunday. Yes, we now utilize some modern bells and whistles, but we have retained the basic look of a historic New England church. On November 24, we will bring out of our treasure what is new and what is old.

Of course, in his parable Jesus is not talking about the world of architecture and interior design. He's referring to the realm we call religion, and to the tension that always exists between the contemporary and the traditional in matters of faith. You and I feel this tension in a hundred different ways – in our varied preferences for congregational hymns, choral music, biblical translations, and education curriculum; in our differing interpretations of Scriptural texts; in the diverse ways we give expression to our Christian beliefs. To use the terms we hear so often today, some of us are “progressives”; others of us are “traditionalists.” Some say, “Give me a religion that rings true for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”; others say, “Gimme that old’ time religion, it’s good enough for me.”

But if you and I take Jesus at his word, both perspectives have value. In order for the Church to remain relevant, it needs to be adaptable and have the capacity to be innovative and creative. In order for the Church to remain faithful, it needs a firm identity and a certain amount of continuity and stability. Jesus anticipates both of these needs in today's key verse: those who want to be citizens of God's kingdom must cultivate the new, and at the same time, cherish the old.

What Jesus is specifically referring to here is the new way of being religious that he brings embodied in the gospel of the kingdom; and the old way of being religious embodied in the Jewish Law. Now, it's always tempting to picture Jesus as indifferent or even hostile to Judaism, but it would be a big mistake for us to do so. Yes, Jesus presents a radical challenge to the status quo of his time, but in truth he is less a revolutionary than a reformer. He builds his ministry on the foundation of his Jewish faith and is deeply respectful of it. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17). In other words, Jesus doesn't tear down the old structure of religion and replace it with a new one. Rather, he tries to preserve the best of the old structure; but he does it in such a way that he introduces elements that sound very new.

For example, we hear this consistent refrain in his Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you” . . . “You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you” (5:21-44). Notice: Jesus asserts his authority to reinterpret the Jewish law; but when he does this, he doesn’t water down God’s requirements for righteousness; to the contrary, he makes them thicker and tougher. Throughout his ministry, he challenges religious practices that violate the original intent of the law and are more harmful than they are helpful to God’s children. For Jesus, loving relationships are always more important than rigid rules. What is the point of keeping Sabbath laws if someone goes hungry on the Sabbath? What is the point of remaining ritually clean if someone who needs healing cannot even be touched? And, for our purposes today, what is the point of giving generously if we do our giving just to meet a legal or institutional requirement?

In Jesus’ time, the Jewish law prescribed an offering of “first fruits,” a gift of 10% of one’s harvest or income. This law was put in place to ensure that worshipers properly acknowledged God as the source of all they have, and that they gave back to God a meaningful portion of their assets. But for all its spiritual value, the tithe was subject to abuses. Giving 10% became a source of pride for those who were able to meet this goal and a source of shame for those who were unable to do so. Giving a prescribed amount also became a matter of mere duty and obligation, like paying taxes, rather than a spontaneous offering of the giver. And worst of all, giving became less and less an offering to God and more and more a means of supporting religious institutions like the temple and the priesthood. The message became, “Pay up!” rather than “Give freely from a grateful heart.”

Against this background, Jesus advocates a way of giving that is both something old and something new. We might expect Jesus to cut his followers some financial slack – you know, “Forget the fixed percentage and just do the best you can” – but in reality he doesn’t relax God’s guidelines for our stewardship of money; he makes them even more strenuous. Jesus not only accepts the tithe as the benchmark for giving; he encourages his disciples to give more rather than less in relation to the established standard. The new thing that Jesus does is to relax the tight grip of legalism and institutional control, and make giving a matter of the heart. He doesn’t say, “The temple needs your money, and according to the law this is the amount you owe.” No, he says, “‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’ (Matthew 6:20), so make the giving of your treasure an expression of your heart.”

The apostle Paul captures this new spirit of giving perhaps better than anyone else. During one of his missionary journeys, Paul takes up a collection among the newly-established churches across the Mediterranean world. Today we would call it a “designated” offering; it’s directed specifically to support the mother church in Jerusalem, whose members are experiencing poverty and persecution. In today’s Epistle reading, he makes a financial appeal to the church at Corinth. He holds before them the example of the Christians in Macedonia, who are just as poor and afflicted as those in Jerusalem. And yet, Paul reports that the Macedonians “voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means” to their sisters and brothers in a far-off land (2 Corinthians 8:3).

The key word here is “voluntarily” – the Macedonian Christians don’t just do their prescribed duty and do it grudgingly; they give freely out of the generosity of their hearts. Paul encourages the Corinthians to do the same thing: “Each one of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (9:7).

Notice, Paul doesn't try to manipulate the Corinthians with a sob story about the plight of the Jerusalem church; neither does he impose a set amount for the Corinthians' offering. No, Paul says: "Decide for yourself what you are able and willing to give, and give freely and joyfully."

A week from today we will observe New Consecration Sunday here at the Woodbury United Methodist Church. All of our regular worshipers will be asked to make a financial pledge to God in support of our congregation's ministry for the coming year. This appeal is coming at a time when our church is experiencing considerable financial stress. Our offerings during the current year are running 17% behind the total that was pledged, so we're now facing difficult questions about how to increase income and decrease expenses. Unless our cash flow situation changes dramatically, we may be forced to make hard choices that many of us won't like.

Under these circumstances, the financial leaders of our church might be tempted to play hardball. They could make their stewardship appeal solely on the basis of our financial need and our common obligation to respond to that need. They could say, "The church is short on money; there is a biblical standard for how much money we should give; so fork it over."

But that would be a message for Old Consecration Sunday; November 17 is New Consecration Sunday. The difference in the two approaches to stewardship reflects the difference between religion under the law and religion under the gospel. Both have their place and purpose, but the new approach takes precedence over the old one. According to both Jesus and Paul, the spiritual health of the giver is just as important as the financial health of the receiver. New Consecration Sunday places the emphasis on the individual's need to give in order to become a mature disciple, not on the church's need to receive in order to balance a budget. The accent is on giving freely and joyfully, rather than giving "reluctantly and under compulsion." This is why our financial leaders are not feeling any panic and not applying any pressure. They trust you to use your spiritual freedom responsibly and to give generously.

Jesus says, "Every scribe 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." Granted, there are many features of "that old time religion" which are worth preserving, but legalism and heavy-handedness are not among them. The gospel offers us a new way to practice stewardship – a way of freedom and joy – and this is the way our church has chosen. To paraphrase a comment I just heard in our men's Bible class, our situation is not that we've got to give; our situation is that we get to give. God help all of us to be faithful.