### “What Is New and What Is Old” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 30, 2023

**Psalm 119:129–134**

129 Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. 130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. 131 With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments. 132 Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your custom towards those who love your name. 133 Keep my steps steady according to your promise, and never let iniquity have dominion over me. 134 Redeem me from human oppression, that I may keep your precepts.

**Matthew 13:33, 44, 51–52**

33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. . .”

44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. . .

51 “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” 52And he said to them, “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.”

Welcome this morning to The First Church. It is one of the greatest blessings of my life and a privilege to be able to share my theological reflection with you. I look forward to seeing new and old friends every time we gather here. All are welcome.

Today we will be looking for inspiration from the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. It is true that even the Gospels are “old” to us. But it is also true that wisdom, truth, and hope can come to us from sources new and old, inspiring us as we go forward.

I like the prayer we find in Psalm 119 today. Psalm 119, by the way, is the longest chapter in the Bible, so today’s reading is only a small portion. I see the author asking for two things in this passage, first that iniquity or evil will not have dominion over him, and secondly, that human oppression may not restrict his life. The first request seems to refer to not letting evil have any inroad into his heart. The second request says that even oppression that is purely external would create problems and make it difficult for the author to “keep your precepts” (119:134). The writer feels a connection with God and asks that he be delivered from oppression so that it may not interfere with his relationship with God. Human oppression might take away his freedom of religious expression, and so he prays for release from that threat.

I think it is interesting that the writer of the psalm does not ask for protection for purely selfish reasons, but so that the relationship with God may be maintained, and may be acted out in its optimal environment. The writer is very aware of how this relationship has changed his life. Imagine for a moment that you did not have a good relationship with God—what would your life be like? What would your *family* life be like? Would you have a sense that something needed to change? Would you become a seeker of God’s truth?

Now I want to look at some of the short parables in Matthew 13. These are like short stories from a variety of situations. Can we see a trend if we look at them together? The first one is a one sentence parable that says the kingdom is like when a woman takes some yeast and sprinkles it into a lump of dough, mixing it until the dough is permeated with the yeast. What happens when yeast is added to flour? Nothing at first, but given time and the right conditions, the whole thing expands. Believers can be like yeast sprinkled into society. We need not be very numerous to have an impact upon the whole.

Have you ever met a person who brightens up your day, even with a brief encounter? Such people are like the yeast, leavening the whole lump of society. We should think about the *rising* that happens when yeast is active. The entire lump of bread *rises up*. We could extend this idea to see that *rising* *spiritually* will be our experience. God sees our daily struggles and our spiritual growth, our rising up. We are precious treasure in God’s eyes.

The next parable speaks of a treasure hidden in a field. The person who located it went and sold all that he owned so that he might go and buy that field. I imagine him as a traveler who went off the beaten path and made this amazing discovery. Perhaps he was a *seeker* of treasure, searching everywhere. It speaks of the kingdom as something rare and precious, that you ought to give everything you have in order to obtain. This does not mean to abandon our loved ones. It means seeking the kingdom of God wholeheartedly, giving it everything one has. How about you? Are you a seeker searching for truth, or searching for greater understanding, maybe in search of a greater connection with Jesus? Seek and you will find!

The same message is found in the next parable that speaks of a pearl of great price that a merchant was desperate to purchase, so “he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (13:45). These parables show the priceless value of the kingdom, worth more than anything else in life. This implies that the kingdom has everlasting value.

Jesus asks the disciples if they’ve understood the parables. They say they have, and he then gives another parable. It’s as if he is saying, “alright, so you seem to understand these truths about the kingdom. Get ready for what’s next.” He 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” (13:52). Jesus has been training his apostles and now they approach a time where they will be the ones to carry the message without him being personally present to lead them.

Jesus is not saying that the old is good and the new is bad, nor the opposite. In fact, he’s saying that good treasure can be *either* old or new, and we need to be like a well-educated scribe who is ready to draw upon truth, whether it is old or new. This may not sound like a radical statement to us today, but it was a *bit* radical in those days. The ancient world placed a high premium upon what was old, and often denigrated everything that was new.

In those days, especially in religion, to teach something “new” was considered flaky and irreverent. Jesus, and later Paul, put more potential positive spin on the idea of “newness.” Jesus even characterizes his teaching as new wine. In Mark 2 he makes this comparison: “no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins” (2:22). Red wine has lees, leftover yeast particles that will expand within any container.

Thus, new wine has explosive power, and Jesus is implying that his teachings also have explosive power. You can’t put them into old wineskins, that is, into old categories of thinking, because they will burst apart your old ways of thinking. To hold Jesus’ teachings, you need new wineskins that are capable of stretching, in other words, new ways of thinking that are capable of expanding and adapting. And in a way aren’t we back to the idea of that expansive yeast? And don’t bread and wine go together?

So, a good scribe keeps the *old* and true as well as accepting what’s *new* and true. This is pictured as being “trained for the kingdom” (13:52). To be able to correctly perceive truth, we need some mental culture, some training. We need to be adaptable in this life, ready to listen and consider if what we are hearing *is* Truth. I see the Matthew parable as affirming the need for mental culture and for perceptiveness about what is truly to be treasured and respected. A true scribe knows what to respect, what to preserve. *Weigh* things in your heart; do they seem true?

Let us become wise scribes. Let us develop spiritual *taste*, so that we know what is good. When we do, we will radiate spiritual aroma. We are all on our journeys. We are traveling on our unique pathways, but together. Let us humbly support one another on our journeys, and see each other with God’s eyes.