Sunday, July 30, 1972
THE NEW AND THE OLD
Mark 2:18-22

Just as any prophet, leader or teacher with new and fresh ideas has critics, Jesus had his. No matter what he did or said, there were always those standing by waiting, listening, and watching closely, trying their best to find things wrong with what he said or did. And his critics were not always of the most constructive kind. They tried their best to trap him, to get him tangled up, to get him to say something which he would later regret, or which could be used against him.

When Jesus chose Matthew to be one of his disciples, there were those who were critical. Why should he choose a tax-collector, a sinner, to be one of his closest followers? And Jesus had attended a dinner party at the home of Matthew and the other guests were more sinners — people with whom church people should not mingle. Again. the critics' tongues wagged.

One day these same critics did their best to start an argument between Jesus and John the Baptist. They asked Jesus, "Why is it that the disciples of John the Baptist fast and follow so strictly the rules and requirements of the Jewish religion and yet you and your disciples do not fast and are not strict enough in following the rules and regulations. You do not have the good old-time religion."

In answer to this question and implied criticism, Jesus told the parable which we read as our scripture lesson this morning. "No one sews a piece of unshrunk or new cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins; the wine is lost and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins."

The parable points up the age-old problem and controversy of the new versus the old. Jesus was saying to those around him and to us, that Christianity, God's new covenant with people, cannot_ merely be squeezed and contained in the old skin of Judaism; His coming, the Good News about God to the world, cannot just be patched onto the old cloth of Judaism; for if it is, it will tear the cloth, and both will be useless. Sometimes outworn forms cannot contain the fer111enting and bubbling new wine of God's new order.

As he did many times, Jesus took a specific problem, a specific issue and question and then expanded it into a more general principle which relates it to all of life. There are times when we cannot patch up the old. There are occasions which demand new garments, new wineskins.

However, the Pharisees were saying to Jesus and to others, the old is good enough. It was good enough for Abraham, for Isaac, for Jacob, for Moses, for our fathers and those who followed them — so why isn't it good enough for you and your disciples? Why don't you follow the law, the old way, as you should?

We can sympathize with the attitude of the Pharisees and others, for all of us prefer the old to the new at times. Of course, there are many exceptions — such things as automobiles, TV sets, dishwashers, and other appliances norma11y 1ike the new better even though we complain that they don't make them the way they used to.

Sometimes we seem to prefer the new old, and so new homes are built that have all the latest conveniences but are made to look old. Years ago, the gear shift of the automobile was on the floor; now you can get it back on the floor as an option, and it costs more, and many are buying it that way. We have modern or new early American furniture.

At the turn of the century, only the wealthy had auto-mobiles, the poor had horses; now only the wealthy have horses. Electricity has made the once lowly candle now a symbol of gracious living and fireplaces are more popular than ever. The latest discovery of city planners is walking.

But aside from these paradoxes, most of us do not like to make major changes. New things are many times uncertain, untried and seem risky. We feel more at home with known situations.

Much of this human tendency of preferring the old and tried is good and necessary. Jesus would certainly grant this fact. A people forever running off after something new would never build a civilization or anything else. There is much that comes from the past which is worth re-membering and keeping alive. In fact, one, definition of 3. a classic is that it has qualities which speak to every age and condition. The great classical music, the great classical novels, and paintings are that because of their eternal qualities. We feel the same about the Bible. This is also what makes the parables of Jesus so great — the fact that they contain truths which speak to us as much as they did to the people of his time. The same can be said of the great philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle and others. Their names live on — their teachings live on because they point to truths which continue.

So, the past and the old are important. However, we need to remember that the “classics” were themselves once new, and when new were not always first accepted. And like any good thing, this human tendency to prefer the old can be carried too far and destroy us. We can find ourselves hanging onto the past for too long for the wrong reason. Soon we find we are doing things simply because they have always been done that way and it may no longer be the most useful or helpful way. Or we find that we believe things only because we’ve always believed that way. We become defensive and afraid of change of any kind. One of the best Greek Philosophers thought that the process of life could best be summed up as a constant flux, a constant changing and movement. We as Christians believe that life has movement and purpose. We do not have a static God. We believe that we cannot commit ourselves to any permanent resting place here.

Yet we often find it difficult to believe that old ways need revision. When the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published in the 1950’s, many people refused to even look at it, but preferred the King James Version al-most as if it were the original. They preferred the old to the new. Church architecture has had the same problem. People prefer the so-called “old-style” church, many times not realizing that one time it was a “new-style. “The point is we may be in trouble when we just prefer the old only because it is old, and we are more used to it.

Also, sometimes we want to stay with the old because it’s easier that way, because we do not want to face the reality of a changing world. These are not the easiest of times, perhaps, and in a time of uncertainty, people look for some anchors, some seemingly safe harbors. But there’s something wrong when we only look backward with nostalgia instead of living in the present and looking forward with some anticipation — when we begin to believe that the best things lie behind us. They may in fact lie ahead of us. There is a story about an Arab who felt hungry one night. He lit a candle and opened a date. It was wormy and he threw it aside. He

tried another and it had worms. So did a third. Whereupon he blew out the candle and ate the fourth one. Rather than face the future with some possible changes, some people often blow out the candle and continue with things as they are and hope for the best. Or we simply try to patch something new on something old.

But you see there are times when we cannot patch up the old. Did you ever try putting a new automobile engine in a car whose body was falling apart? The new speed of the new engine may only tear the body up faster. There are occasions which demand a new garment, new wineskins for the new wine. We sometimes hang onto or try to, to the old long after it is useless.

In 1776, for example, it was not inevitable that we chose independence. There were opportunities for adjustments and compromises with Britain and the colonies might have continued their life as a part of the empire. But when the decision was made for freedom, the old ways were gone. Later when Lincoln said that this nation could not endure half slave and half free, the die was cast for a struggle that would be another dividing point in our history. The wineskin of slavery could not hold the new wine of freedom.

Part of the problem with the race issue in this country since that time is a hankering by many people to hang onto an old culture, an old way of life where the black person had a certain place in society and stayed there. But that has been changed.

When Columbus made his voyage to the new world, it was no use for the old world to pretend that nothing had happened and to try to conduct its business as usual. Everything was changing and people had to accept a larger point of view and make their plans on a new level. Something new had to be taken into account. And now for us with the dawn of space travel, we again have to rethink our ideas of the way things are. This kind of new wine will not fit into our old wineskins. Nor can we patch it onto an old worldview.

And the same kind of problem of the old making way for the new can be seen in our personal lives. Our lives are not one smooth continual development from infancy to adulthood. There are times when radical changes occur. There are explosions, as any parent or young person can testify. The old has to make way for the new. We grow up and we have to throw out some of our childish ideas. They cannot be merely patched onto. They may have been fine and useful for us as a child but are not adequate for an adult.

But because some people do not want to grow up, to make the necessary changes, their lives are nothing but patches and tears. Thus, we may find persons who are adults in one way, but completely childish in another. A new scheme in Psychiatry called “Transactional Analysis” has worked this out in a unique way and helps persons discover the inconsistencies in their lives and helps to work them out.

In religion in particular, we may find a person who is very adult in many kinds of ways. He will have made way for new thoughts, new ideas in many aspects of his life, but not so far as his faith is concerned and so many adults still harbor very childish religious ideas.

Marriage is another aspect of our personal lives where we sometimes try to pour new wine into old wineskins or try to patch a bit of new cloth onto the old. In other words, some people approach marriage with the idea that this is just one new aspect of their living and that even though married, they can maintain many of their old ways, their old habits, their old selfish attitudes. They try to bring all of their previous way of life into their new life. Some try to bring

their parents into the marriage, and they think they can still be dependent on mom and dad. Marriage to them is just a patch onto their old way of life. But when this happens as the parable points out, the garment of the marriage usually tears and fails. Marriage, like many other aspects of our living is new wine and it calls for new wine skins. The Bible says — for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one. So, they are no longer two, but one. This is something new — no longer two, but one! The old must be left behind, something new is formed.

As you may know, in most of our marriage ceremonies in this church we have a way of symbolizing this. We ask both the bride and the groom to each blow out a lighted candle which each of them is holding, which symbolizes their single lives, their lives up to that point. They do this after together lighting one new large single candle which stands for their new life beginning together at that moment.

In the same way, we cannot simply patch the Christian faith onto our lives, or just be a partial Christian in one aspect of our living or another. One of the supreme ironies in the movie the GODFATHER is the last scene where the new young Godfather, is the sponsor at the Baptism of his sister's child, and while he is taking the vows of a sponsor, his men are systematically on his orders, killing off his competitors. Here is the Christian faith trying to be patched onto a basically corrupt life. Here we see a person who in most of his family and home life has a Christian flavor, but it's only a patch.

But the same irony can exist in us. We can be Christian at home and unjust in business or very kind in our business or professional life and unloving at home.

God wants to make us totally new! New wine in new wineskins, not just a patch on an old garment. That's why becoming a follower of Christ has been compared to being born again!

The new and the old! It's a continuing tension — both in the world at large and in us. The new is always breaking into our world and in our lives, and sometimes it tears the old or the old wineskins break. Yet it is the witness of the Bible that many of the upheavals in history express the creative spirit of God at work. It's part of God's continuing creation. If this is true, then we are to take close note of the changes that are continually occurring and try to understand where God is working in all that's going on.

We believe in a God who makes all things new. That's the witness of the Bible — "Behold I make all things new!"

With such a faith, the style of life of the Christian is one with an openness to the future, an openness to the new both in the world and in himself and others. This does not mean that we accept uncritically just anything simply because it is new or different — but we certainly want to examine it carefully. It may be God's way of breaking in, God's way of working, God's way of making things new!

We do not know what the future will bring. But it is our faith that God is moving, and God is leading, and thus no matter what the future holds, the important thing is that God will be there! Amen.