Sunday November 25, 1979

"MIXING THE OLD AND THE NEW" Mark 2:18-22

Just as any prophet, leader or teacher with new and fresh ideas has critics, Jesus Christ had his. No matter what he said or did, there were usually those standing by, waiting, listening and watching, trying to find things wrong with what he said or did.

When Jesus chose Matthew to be one of his disciples, there were those who were critical. Why should he coose a tax-collector, a blatant sinner, to be one of his followers? Jesus had attended a dinner party at the home of Matthew, and the other guests were not the most reputable people. Again the critics made their noises.

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 forms and requirements of the Jewish religion and yet you and your disciples do not fast and are not careful enough in following the rules and regulations. You do not have the good old time religion."

In answer to these critics, Jesus related this parable--"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."

This parable points up the age-old problem of mixing the old and the new. Jesus was saying to those around him and to us that his teachings about God, that God's purposes for all people and for the world cannot be understood or squeezed or contained in our old wineskins, that is, in our old way of understanding religion and the world. We need a whole new outlook. A new way of seeing things cannot be simply patched onto an old way of seeing things. If it is just patched on, it will tear the fabric and both the old and the new will be useless. There are times when old forms cannot contain the fermenting and bubbling wine of God's new order.

There are times when we cannot patch the new onto the old. There are occasions which demand new garments, new wineskins--a whole new way of seeing things.

However the critics of Jesus were saying--"The old is good enough. It was good enough for Abraham and for Isaac, for Jacob, for Moses and for our fathers and mothers who came after them, so why isn't it good enough for you and your disciples? Why don't you follow the old forms as the rest of us do?"

We can understand this attitude, for all of us prefer the old to the new at various times. Of course we are not often very consistent in this. We like new automobiles, new TV sets, new clothes, new gadgets of all kinds, while at the same time we complain that much of what is new is not made the way it used to be.

Sometimes we even prefer the "new-old," and so new homes are built that have all the latest conveniences but are made to look old. Years ago when I was growing up the gear shift of all automobiles was on the floor, then in a marvelous engineering advance it moved to the steering column and finally we had automatic transmissions. For the past number of years we've been able to get the gear shift back on the floor, as an option that costs more and we're amazed at how advanced we are. We also have modern or new early American furniture.

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

But aside from these contradictions, most of us do not like to make major changes, particularly in the way in which we are used to understanding people, our religion, and the world at large. New things, new ways of perceiving situations are many times uncertain, and seem too risky. We feel more at home with doing it and seeing it in the same old way.

Some of this human tendency of preferring the old and the tried is good and necessary. 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 remembering and keeping alive. In fact one definition of a classic is that it has qualities which speak to every age and condition. Classical music, classical literature, classical art in every form is that because it contains eternal qualities. What makes the parables of Jesus classic is that they contain truths which speak to us as much as they did to the people of his time. Classical philosophy has the same quality, it lives on because of the truth it contains.

So the past and the old are important. The past should instruct and guide us, but not imprison us. The classics were themselves once new and when new were not always at first accepted.

Furthermore, like any good thing, our human tendency to prefer the old can be carried too far and blind us to new truth which is always emerging. We can become defensive and afraid of change of any kind.

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 almost as if it were the original. Church architecture has had the same problem. People have preferred the so-called "old-style" church, often forgetting it one time it was a "new-style." We can be blind to new truth if we all the time prefer the old only because we are more used to it.

Also sometimes we want to stay with the old because we feel more secure and we are afraid to face the reality of a changing world. These are not the easiest of times and in times of uncertainty, we look for some anchors or some seemingly safe harbors. And that's understandable. But there's something wrong if we look only backward with nostalgia, instead of living in the present and looking for new answers. There's something wrong when we begin to believe that the best things lie behind us. They may in fact lie ahead of us.

So our Christian faith calls us to be open to new possibilities. There are times when we cannot patch the new onto the old; when we cannot put new wine into old wineskins.

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 part of the British Empire. But when the decision was made for freedom, the old ways were gone. The wine of freedom could not be poured into the old wineskin of colonialism, it would burst the skin. And this is what's happened to colonialism all over the world.

Later when Lincoln said that this nation could not enure half slave and half free, the die was cast for a struggle that would be another dividing point in our history. The old wineskin of slavery could not hold the new wine of freedom.

Part of the problem with continuing racism in this country and around the world is that many people still wear the old cloth of seeing black people as not equal and have a view of society where the black person is a second class citizen and the new cloth of freedom cannot simply be patched on to that kind of view. A whole new view of human beings as brothers and sisters is needed.

The same is true in the case of the movement for equal opportunity for women. If we continue to have a narrow view of the place of women in society, then the concept of equal opportunity cannot be patched on. It will tear the fabric. It takes a whole new perspective and that's what Jesus was talking about in this parable.

When Columbus made his voyage to the new world, it was no use for the old world to pretend that nothing had happened and try to conduct its business as usual. Everything was changing and people had to accept a different view of the world and make their plans according to a different perspective. And now for us with the dawn of space travel, we again have to re-think 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 world-view.

Physics according to the theories and discoveries of Einstein and those who have followed him, cannot simply be patched on to pre-Newtonian and even Newtonian physics.' Scientists have to begin from an entirely different premise. It takes a wholly different frame of reference.

That's exactly what Jesus was talking about. He was saying to his critics, "If you think of religion as primarily rules and regulations, then you will never understand what I'm talking about." He wasn't saying that some rules and regulations aren't necessary. He was saying that that's not where true religion begins.

In many areas of our life we need a totally new perception before we can come to any new understanding. Our old perceptions can blind us to new truth. And our perceptions can be distorted so easily by old prejudices.

For example, what happens to people's perceptions of another person when that person is believed to be a homosexual? Recent research has disclosed some remarkable findings.

In one experiment the researcher produced a video tape of what purported to be a counseling session between a female client and her therapist. The tape was then screened for an audience of more than 100 students preparing for professional work in therapy. Before the screening all the students had been provided with a lengthy clinincal history of the client who appeared on the video tape. Half of these written histories advised the reader that the client was a lesbian; the remaining subjects were led to believe that the client was heterosexual. In actuality the actress who portrayed the client was exclusively heterosexual. All the other information provided the students was identical, so that it became reasonable to infer that differences in the student's attitudes toward the client on the video tape were as a result of whether or not they believed her to be homosexual or heterosexual.

And that's what happened. Those students who had been told that the client was lesbian saw her as more defensive, less nurturant, less affiliative, less autonomous and less self-confident. Those who believed she was heterosexual saw her entirely in a different way and both groups had viewed the same video-tape. It was as if they had seen two different women. We see what we believe.

It's difficult to have an open perspective in order to be able to see things as they are, rather than seeing things as we are.

Our old preconceptions, our old prejudices can blind us. They can be the old wineskins which are unable to receive new wine. They can be the old cloth which is not able to receive a new patch.

It's a reminder that somethings cannot be patched on. We cannot simply patch the Christian faith onto our old lives, or just be a partial Christian in one aspect of our living. Then our lives will not be more whole, but rather torn apart like the new patch tears from an old garment.

As Christians we are called to see people and the world from a totally new perspective. This means that there's more to our faith than narrow rules, more to it than just going through certain so-called religious motions. Our faith calls us to see all human beings as our brothers and sisters. It calls us to become loving and forgiving of one another. It calls us to see God as a loving and forgiving God.

It's not simply a matter of the new versus the old or the old versus the new. We are not to discard something simply because it's old nor are we to accept something simply because it's new. God calls us to be open to the truth that can be present in both the old and the new. But to do that we have to be open, questioning, seeking people. Amen.