

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 27, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 – Things of Value**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

The Gospel lessons for the past few Sundays have focused on some of the parables of Jesus. A parable, as you know, is a way of describing something we may not understand by comparing it to something else with which we are familiar..

So it is that we say, “the kingdom of heaven is like” a mustard seed, and it is also like yeast, and also like a fine pearl, and a fisherman’s net.

To be honest, I have a little problem with these “simple” illustrations, and the problem is that I really don’t have a lot of appreciation for mustard seed, for example. It’s not part of my daily life.

And that means that I sometimes take the easy way out regarding the parables, which is to say I gloss over them. I know they meant something to the people who heard them, and I let it go at that.

And then, at the tail end of this morning’s Gospel, we find: “⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” [Remember, I have already admitted I didn’t even try to understand some of it. Could be a problem here!] ⁵² And 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.” ⁵³ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.”¹

¹*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 13:51-53). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Well, guess I'll just have to focus on this treasure that is old and that is new, and see what it means today.

Which, it turns out, is easy.

It's all about a tea pot, some comic books, the Lambeth Conference, and Antiques Road Show on P B S. Oh, and it's also about this congregation, and Susan Latimer², and that which is to come as you and she and God do some new things here.

Have you understood all this? Not yet? I shall explain. The sermon would be way too short if we stopped here.

Look, what Jesus says over and over again in his ministry is that he has come to change things.

He is looking at the old things in a new way. Not simply replacing them, but finding those old things which are of value and keeping them, even enhancing them so they are even more worthwhile.

Jesus honors and keeps what is good and profitable from his heritage, but at the same time, he doesn't hesitate to do what the Father has sent him to do, and that's one of the things that makes him so different from us. He doesn't hesitate.

If you're like me, you are more comfortable with that which you know, with which you are familiar. Hesitation in the face of change is natural. We – most of us – do not rush out to embrace the new. We honor the old.

For instance, this tea pot.

² The Rev. Susan Latimer is rector-elect of St. John's Episcopal Church. Her first service will be August 3, 2008.



It was a gift from my grandmother, Irene Agnes Black Kent, to her husband, my grandfather, Moss Ethelbert Kent, on the occasion of their second wedding anniversary, April fifth, nineteen-hundred-one. It is sterling silver. It is over a hundred years old. Regardless of any family history interest it may have, it has some definable monetary value.

If I'm unsure about it, all I have to do is carry it into Antiques Road Show, and someone will tell me – not only that it has worth, but what that worth might be, if I were to offer it at auction.

But not everything that is old is deemed to be valuable. My children decided some twenty years ago that buying and carefully storing comic books would be a good investment. They thought, as did a lot of other folks at the time, that Marvel Comics number whatever (like golf, the lower the number the better) would significantly increase in value.

Originally, they intended the investment to help pay for college. Their time horizon has shifted somewhat further out, perhaps well beyond their retirement, because it turned out that not everything old is valuable.

The old, the tested, the familiar, the known, is comfortable. And some of it has value.

The unknown, the new, is scary. And I hope you know we're no longer talking about tea pots here.

That scary component of the unfamiliar is what got Jesus crucified. He preached something new, albeit in a very traditional way – he went into the synagogues and took his turn reading from the Bible of his day, and then defined it in a new way. He opened the hearts of his listeners to see the old in a new way.

His enemies were too scared to try to listen. They attached more value to the old, to that which they knew and valued, than they did to following this teacher with the new ideas. For them, Jesus was too much. He challenged the faith once received, as it were, and did so in the name of God. It was blasphemy.

Jesus Christ claimed to understand the old in a new way, and he wanted to share what he thought was “good news.”

That's what we're supposed to be doing. Not just those of us called to be preachers, but all of us. We're supposed to spread the Gospel.

We were not created to just sit here and do the same thing day after day. God has a purpose for his creation. There is work that needs to be done, in his name, in this world, and we are the ones to do it.

And that brings us to Lambeth, where lots of bishops have their mitres all akimbo and their cassocks in a knot. Why, you ask?

Well, some folks in the Anglican Communion are doing a new thing.

And you know about new things – they're scary.

Some good and honorable Christians are firmly convinced that this “new” business the Episcopal Church and others are proposing is simply wrong. It is not what God intended. Jesus did not ordain women, and therefore, Q E D, neither can we. It is our sacred duty, they say, to defend the faith once revealed. And what you're doing, Episcopal Church, is not what God showed us. End of discussion.

And, some good and honorable Christians are firmly convinced that God is calling his church to acts of continuing revelation. Honoring the past, taking from it that which is valuable, but correcting the omissions which allowed so many to be excluded.

The problem is, we can't haul our argument into Antiques Road Show to find out what has value.

And the maddening thing is, we're not supposed to be able to. There is to be no outside arbiter for us, even though some in the Anglican Communion will try to create one.

That would be the easy way out. Let someone pass judgment on what is valuable. Let someone tell us our tea pot is really sterling or just plate, or that our comic books are worthless, but just tell us and settle this thing.

Oh, there will be judgment. If nothing else, at the end of the age, whenever that may be, the angels will come and throw out the bad fish caught up in their net. They'll also pull up the weeds from last week's Gospel and toss them into the fire.

But until then, all we can do is allow these “new” ideas sufficient time. Those which are blessed of God will flourish, and those not blessed will die.

But for now, we – all of us – have to do what Jesus commanded – love one another. Painful as it may be, we have to find a way to love one another so much that we can continue to live and worship together. And that will be uncomfortable for us.

But our discomfort is nothing compared to that of God when one bishop of the church says he cannot receive communion from or with some particular other bishop of the church.

Jesus Christ did not die on a cross so that we could degrade one another.

Jesus Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Speaking of abundant life, at this time next week, you will have something new in this church. Someone new, of course, Susan Latimer, but something new as well. And we don't know what it is.

Some of you, perhaps many of you, have hopes – things you want to see Saint John's accomplish. I suspect Susan has her own hopes and dreams.

It will help, I think, over the next few months, to remember that God has a purpose. God intends for us to see something which needs to be done and to do it.

That may be something as magnificent as Manna Meal has turned out to be.

Or it may be something simple. Or it may be lots of things.

Each of you, and Susan, is “like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old!” You are to be a family of God's people, living and loving and working together.

Honoring one another.

Listening to one another.

Loving one another.

And God will make a new thing in this place. And in this place, to God alone be the glory, now and always. *Amen.*