

"AND HE SPOKE TO THEM IN PARABLES"

INTRODUCTION The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are reviewing some of the "firsts" in the life and ministry of Jesus. Thus far, we have considered his first temptation, his first miracle, and his first sermon. Today, on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, we turn to consider his first parable.

A parable has been defined as "a short, simple story from which a moral or spiritual truth may be drawn". Master preacher that He was, Jesus had a genius for the right illustration. By a casual reference to salt or light, a farmer sowing seed, or a woman baking, He could put a shine of heaven on the earthiest of scenes.

FIRST PARABLES The first parables of Jesus form a tandem that should not be broken. The subjects he co-opted on this occasion were cloth and wineskins. These would readily suggest themselves at a feast, and Jesus was enjoying the company of his disciples at a hearty meal.

These parables were prompted by a question that was put to Jesus. They asked him "Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Behind this question, however, was an issue that has often troubled men across the ages of human history. It's the question: "How do the existing old and the insurgent new relate to one another?"

Now I think we have an issue here that can create a point of friction whenever and wherever it surfaces. How does a young son or daughter relate to the ways and wishes of his or her parents? Or how does a newly elected Congressman relate to his older, more experienced peers? How does a university with a proud reputation relate to innovative ideas from students and young faculty members? How does an established business relate to suggestions from its junior executives? How does a church that is strong and rich in tradition relate to the cries for change from the under-thirty set? I think it's all there in that question put to Jesus: "Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

The wisdom of Jesus on this subject is conveyed in these two brief stories. To patch an old garment, he said, with new cloth is to invite disaster. New cloth exposed to wear and water will shrink, pulling away from the old, to the waste of both. Likewise, to put new wine into old skins is to invite disaster, because once the new begins to expand through fermentation the old skin will break and wine and skin alike will be lost.

Now these stories are not as easy as they sound. They're not, in my judgement, saying exactly the same thing. Let's dig a little deeper to see what they're suggesting. and move around the fringes of both..

THE PARABLE OF THE PATCH The parable of the patch was beamed at the Pharisees. I think Jesus was making it perfectly clear here that the message He came to share could not in any way be made to harmonize with the joyless legalism of the Pharisees. However, it is critical that we note that Jesus was not disclaiming all connections with Pharisaism and classical Judaism. The Hebrew Bible was dear to Jesus, as were such other institutions as the sabbath, the synagogue, and the temple. He came not to destroy the old, but to fulfill it. The new would not supercede the old, but incorporate it. The new would not simply follow the old - it would appropriate it - build upon it - embody it.

If we take Jesus seriously here, the new should not resent the old or seek to displace it. After all, the new someday will be as the old is today. A Rabbi back in the 2nd century commenting on the difference between new wine and old wine said:

"He who learns from the young - unto what may he be likened?
Unto one who drinks wine from the vat. And he who learns
from the old, to what may he be likened? Unto one who drinks
from old wine".

We should not try to displace the old wine. It has gone through its period of fermentation. It is heavy and strong and it has years behind it. Those who have been around for a while are perhaps able to tell us more recently arrived types of the difference between a fad and a trend. In a time when the young are all too willing to cash in the assets of the kingdom, and do away with much of contemporary church life - the old wine ~~and~~ temper our rashness. The new should not resent the old, or seek to displace it.

On the other hand - the old should want the new to be expansive...and not simply allow it to be, but wish it to be expansive. The old were once that way. Isn't it true that as we grow older, we seem to develop a constitutional dislike for change - not a Christian dislike, mind you, but a constitutional dislike for change. But - if we are to conserve the treasures of the Christian faith, then we must open ourselves to such revisions of the expression of the faith as will make it viable in this decade and decades ~~will~~ to come.

Hans Sachs, author of Masks of Love and Life, said one time:

"Those who become worldly wise and dignified, and full of common sense, according to the opinion of their friends, stand for the rest of their lives and stare at open doors, firmly convinced that it is either not feasible or unbecoming to go a step further".

I remember hearing Ernest Campbell of Riverside Church tell a group of ministers of an experience he had about this time one year ago. Dr. Campbell is the Senior Minister of Riverside Church here in our city, one of the great churches of America. He had been invited to speak up in Troy, New York, a city where people seldom have unusual experiences.....invited to speak at an extensive, broadly based, "Celebration of Good News". Advertised as "A Spiritual Happening For All Christians in the Capital District Area", it was held in the field house of RPI.

Much to Campbell's surprise and disbelief, there were between four and five thousand people there - most of them between the ages of 16 and 20. He said he had never seen so many beards or beads in one place. The style of dress was strictly informal; banners - festive and colorful - were all over the field house. One senses an effervescence and a fermentation taking place. There was music - not only Brahm's "How Lovely Is Thy dwelling Place", but also some gospel music with a decided rock beat lead by a talented group of young arists. The tones were amplified by half a dozen microphones and speakers. Quite a contrast, he said, to his style of a Sunday morning at the majestic and dignified sanctuary of Riverside Church.

He was deeply stirred, he said, by all of this enthusiasm for Jesus. He re-

marked that the forms and expressions of that gathering would probably have little appeal to the congregations that come together in most of our city churches on a Sunday morning. And, on the other hand, most of what we do would fail to turn on the folks who shared in that joyous celebration in the RPI field house that day. The young, he reminded us, tend to see themselves as form-free, but even their form freeness itself becomes a form later on - for no wine can exist without some skin. In that field house, the young and the old....old wine with its vintage and reputation, and the new wine with its brashness and flair for innovation were gathered together to enjoy the Lord with one accord.

It is part of the job of the church to invest old symbols with new meaning. One is reminded of the irate freshman at a university who came back from church one Sunday morning and complained to his roommate:

"I'm finished....Holy Communion means nothing to me. It is simply an ancient rite that is no longer meaningful or valid".

To which his roommate remarked:

"You still shake hands...don't you? Do you realize how antiquated the shaking of the hand is. It is an old Roman custom established to assure the fact that there were no weapons in the hand. And yet you still shake hands".

An old form has been given new meaning in our time and thus it continues to find use.

If under the word of Jesus, we can allow the wheat and the tares to grow up together until the last day, can we not allow the old and the new to co-exist in the church for the good of both. After all, there is but ONE TABLE. And it is ~~the~~ not the table of the veteran Christian, or the table of the newly arrived. It is the Table of the Lord. As Paul said: This is a good place to end, remembering:

"One Lord - one faith - one baptism. One God and Father of us all - who is above all, through all, and in all!"

PRAYER O God, Our Father, open our eyes to see the things that are taking place all around us.

Quicken our minds and our hearts to interpret what we see so that, as thou art trying to speak to us, we will always be ready to listen. Help us to find our way, through we sometimes are feeling like strangers in strange places, knowing that wherever we are, we are always at home in thee. In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen