Christian Education Sunday Message for June 12, 2016

“What’s New is Old”
By Cathy Cono

Please pray with me: “Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

Having just completed the most successful Trash and Treasures sale ever in the history of our Fair on the Green, the idea that “what’s old is new” might have crossed your mind when you read today’s sermon title. It is a thrill and a unique satisfaction to imagine the new life that your donations take on once purchased by a customer at our Trash and Treasures sale. Perhaps an immigrant family will furnish their new home with your items, maybe a young child will receive a treasured toy which his or her parents were not able to otherwise afford, or the suit that no longer fits you will be someone’s ticket to a successful job interview. Praise God for the blessings and opportunities experienced through such renewal!

However, this sermon is entitled “What’s New is Old”. Hmm… By now, many of you will have heard the historic news that this past Wednesday, the New York Annual Conference clergy session took the bold step of approving for ordination and commissioning out queer clergy. Alex da Silva Souto was approved for ordination and Elyse Ambrose, Bruce Lamb, and Lea Matthews were approved for commissioning. For United Methodists in the New York Annual Conference, this is new. The teachings of Christ (which are old) have broken through and shone the way forward to the new. But if you step back and look to our history, you will see that it is not new at all. It is today’s human struggle which needed to look to scripture to seek God’s way. The verses are easy to understand and perfectly clear “Let the same mind be in you
that was in Christ Jesus. For it is God who is at work in you. So that you will shine like stars in
the world.” As Christians, we seek solutions and guidance to whatever problems we face by
thinking and acting like Jesus.

Sometimes, our problems are closer to home than Annual Conference. Over the years,
Mary Taylor has experienced its share of challenges: divisions and differences of opinion,
periods of financial strain, the loss of leaders or other members of the congregation. In one such
circumstance many years ago, I sent a letter to our District Superintendent and Bishop which said
“When I learned of the conflict between members of my beloved church family, I was deeply
saddened and greatly distressed. I could not believe that members of my family had acted in
ways that to me seemed so far from Christian. How could God’s house be overcome by such
negativity and hatred? How could we not tap into the teachings of Jesus to help us handle these
situations?” The answer is that we too are human and sinful. But thanks to God’s grace, the
power of love over hate, looking to scripture, and much prayer, we have been able to weather
these storms and move forward together.

As I prepared for this sermon and considered the 250 years of Methodism in the New
York area which we celebrate this year, I thought about what life must have been like in colonial
times, what conflicts and challenges were faced by the early church. In the days of John Wesley,
slavery, gambling, and the social divide between rich and poor were all a part of life. Wesley
and his fellow Methodists were persecuted by the Church of England because of their radical
ways such as circuit riding, preaching in fields rather than churches, and organizing preaching by
lay people (like a Sunday School Superintendent!). In the mid 1700’s, what John Wesley was
doing was most definitely new. His heart was strangely warmed and he was compelled to make
his vision a reality. According to biographer Stephen Tomkins, Wesley "rode 250,000 miles, gave away 30,000 pounds, and preached more than 40,000 sermons". Through a lifetime of faith and service to God, John Wesley laid the foundations of social justice, mission work, discipline, and ministering to the marginalized out of which our Methodist tradition was born.

As our 7th and 8th grade class showed, Wesley’s followers in New York Philip Embury, Barbara Heck, and Captain Thomas Webb were no different. They struggled with slavery, the uptowner vs. downtowner factions, and organizing a new type of worship service for businessmen on Wall Street. But again, Christian love and God’s plans prevailed. The teachings of Christ (which are old) broke through and shone the way forward to something new.

I began to see a pattern here. Difficulties arise, something needs to change, scripture points the way, and old becomes new. So, I went looking even further back into our history! I imagined that Wesley read Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi… Here’s the cliff notes version to set the stage. Saul of Tarsus was a zealous Pharisee who intensely persecuted the followers of Jesus. On the road to Damascus, a light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground. Jesus asked him, "Saul, why do you persecute me? Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what to do." Saul got up, but when he opened his eyes, he was blind. So those traveling with him led him into Damascus. There Ananaias went to Saul, as instructed by divine revelation, and restored his sight. From that point forward, Saul was transformed and thereafter known as the apostle Paul. He proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and preached in the synagogues.

Saint Paul established the first Christian community at Philippi on his second missionary journey. His letter was written while he was in prison, in danger of death. He wrote to encourage the Philippians who faced their own trials and had their own problems. He gave them
guidance and specific examples to imitate, saying “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. For it is God who is at work in you. So that you will shine like stars in the world.”

But here’s the kicker, Paul hadn’t gotten his inspiration from reading. He had received it directly from Jesus! So he told the Philippians to imitate Christ’s humility, to love one another, be compassionate, be humble, and to set an example like shining stars in the midst of corrupt and self-serving people. Paul’s great hope was that the church he had founded would hold fast to Christ’s teachings so that his life and labors would have not been in vain. He prayed for them to do a new thing, by seeking guidance and wisdom from Christ’s teachings (which were really not so old at that point!).

So where is this all going to end up? For us Christians, what’s new is old. It all starts here: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did the first and best new thing by sending Jesus into the human world. It was a very different place in Biblical times, but man’s sinful nature has been with us ever since man came into being. The struggle between good and evil is as old as the Earth itself. But make no mistake about it, God loves us and sent Christ as our friend, teacher, and divine example of the Word made flesh. Whenever you are faced with a challenge or looking to do a new thing, don’t forget where you come from and turn to God the father and Jesus Christ the son and you won’t go wrong. In the words of John Wesley:

“Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.” Amen!
Imitating Christ’s Humility

1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,
2 Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.
3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.
5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
7 But emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,
8 He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 And every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Shining as Lights in the World

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;
13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
14 Do all things without murmuring and arguing,
15 so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.