

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“A NEW COMMANDMENT”
John 13:31-33a, 34-35
May 2, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

“New” is a relative term. What is new to one person may be as old as the hills to another. “Ancient” tends to mean ancient, whether you’ve known about it or not. Some people have a gift for causing us to see old things in a new light. Jesus, however, had the ability to make all things new, even an ancient commandment.

On the eve of his death Jesus had the Passover meal with his disciples. Here he told them the things most important to him. He gave them a new sense of an old commandment, “*Love one another, as I have loved you.*”

Every day people make discoveries of things they never knew existed. Every day people have insights that are entirely new to them. Unfortunately, many people who need a new outlook, or a new opportunity, or a new faith never find them. Let us pray for those who need something new:

A wedding, taking place at one moment in time, is often thought to require “**something old and something new.**” Something may be carried or worn that represents the past and something that represents the future. We are always living between the past and the future, and, while we cannot return to the past or jump ahead into the future, both influence our lives for good or for ill.

The generations of this modern age have been so enamored with all things new that anything old is automatically devalued. The wealthiest and most privileged, however, eventually run out of new toys to buy. Some young people become burnt-out cases while still in their teens, having seen everything, tried everything, and become weary of everything. Novelty and newness cannot sustain a life for very long. Even the hero, said Emerson, ends up being a bore. Once, while talking incessantly, Dylan Thomas suddenly stopped and said, “**Somebody’s boring me. I think it’s me.**”

The old has its connoisseurs, too, if not its worshipers. Antiques have become a major industry. Pieces of furniture that would have been thrown away by one generation become the treasure of another generation. Collectors find value in old stamps, old bottles, old cars, and old books. Who could possibly have foreseen that comic books would become high-priced collectors' items? Also, manufacturers and merchandisers have discovered the power of words such as “retro,” “vintage,” and “classic” to draw people’s attention. Such words address the hunger for new things by reissuing the old under the label of the new. There are at least as many fads that are reproductions of something old as those that are creations of something entirely new.

Is our fascination with both the old and the new an indication that we are not comfortable in the present? Is our yearning for yesterday and our longing for tomorrow an indictment of today? When life is empty or disappointing where we are, both the past and the future can become very appealing.

“There is no barrier to truth,” says Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, “like the overly familiar word.” It is especially tragic when our religious vocabulary is experienced as consisting of overly familiar words. Yet even words such as love, faith, and God can become empty for some people or in some settings. The challenge for the Christian teacher, preacher, and writer is to find creative ways to shine new light on familiar words and ideas. In his book, *Preaching for Today*, Clyde Fant warns of “the curse of predictability” in preaching, as when a preacher becomes so predictable that the congregation always knows what is coming. He uses a memorable illustration. If a child tells you she is going to hide so she can scare you when you come down the hall, you will cooperate. When she jumps out of her hiding place and says, “Boo!” you will pretend to be scared. On the other hand, if the child does not tell you what she is going to do, when she jumps out of her hiding place and shouts, “Boo!” you will climb the hall wall right up into the attic!

Jesus did his best to prepare his disciples for the time when he would no longer be with them physically. On the night he was betrayed, after Judas had slipped away, Jesus spoke to the disciples of his “glorification.” They did not know he was referring to his imminent death. At this critical time Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment.” A new commandment! Jesus’ followers were familiar with the commandments, likely having been taught them from childhood. They did not know there was a new commandment! What could it be?

The new commandment Jesus gave his disciples was ***“that you love one another.”*** Was this really a new commandment? Hardly. You will find it at least as far back as the third book in the Bible. Leviticus 19:18 says, ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*** This commandment was not original with Jesus. It was ancient and prominent in Judaism. In fact, anywhere humans have been civilized there has been an awareness of the critical importance of loving the neighbor. How can Jesus call this a new commandment?

Can something be both old and new? Of course. The most valuable things are ageless. God dwells in eternity and is the Creator of time. God is experienced as both old and new. In one of his best-known prayers St. Augustine says, ***“Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new.”*** Love is sometimes both old and new, as when a fiftieth wedding anniversary is celebrated by a couple who still love each other.

It is also true that the old can become the new. In Colossians the Christian is spoken of as having ***“stripped off the old self with its practices,”*** and having been ***“clothed” with “the new self.”*** (3:9-10) In John’s apocalyptic vision on Patmos ***“the former things are passed away,”*** and the One who sits on the throne says, ***“Behold, I make all things new.”*** (Rv 21:4-5) Similarly, an ancient commandment can be experienced as something genuinely new.

The ancient commandment to love one’s neighbor becomes new in Jesus’ life and teaching. In him a higher kind of love is revealed, love utterly gracious, love that is self-giving to the point of costly sacrifice. ***“No one has greater love than this,” said Jesus, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”*** (Jn 15:13) God’s truth, of course, is eternal. God is love and always has been. In Jesus Christ, uniquely, the ancient becomes the new.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is in many ways a tragic figure. He has seen everything. ***“There is nothing new under the sun,”*** he claims. As human beings, however, we have a great capacity to see things in ever newer ways. For creative people, such as artists and musicians, this is especially true. Many people, having encountered Jesus, have found the whole world to have changed. Jesus gives new meaning to love simply by saying, ***“Love one another as I have loved you.”***

If you feel called to help us transform the world by loving one another, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church. ***“Love one another,”*** Jesus said, ***“as I have loved you.”***