

How much “new” can we handle?

Rev. Jim Cullen – May 2, 2010

Every day on TV we see images and listen to words about what is new – toothpaste, laundry detergent, President Choice cookies. We are reminded that TV sets have gone from what we have used for years to flat screen to 3D.

I think about all the new things that have entered our lives since I was minister here in the mid-1970s: photocopiers, computers, cell phones, internet, face book and twitter. So many things that started as a novelty or a luxury have now become necessities.

Our cars are different, our homes are different, the way we communicate is different. We rely more on technology than face to face conversation. Community organizations are disappearing. Volunteerism is down. The place of the church in community and in the lives of people is down. The quest for spirituality is way up. The other day the Principal of Queens School of Religion (Queen’s Theological College) offered these statistics. The enrollment in theology across North America is declining at the rate of 6% per year. At Queen’s only a few are actual candidates for ministry in the The United Church. On the other hand enrollment in religious studies has gone from a few 100 to 1400 in less that 10 year.

Attitudes around various social issues have changed - the role of women in the work place, our understanding of human sexuality, the rights of minorities, and the care for the physically and mentally challenged.

We have all become world citizens. In minutes we know about the volcano in Iceland, deaths in Afghanistan, floods in China, an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and government unrest in Thailand.

This raises the question. How much “new” can we handle? Sometimes we want to say that the old and familiar, the tried and true, is just fine. The challenge for us is that when we live as people seeking God’s will there will always be “new”.

The word “new” is central to both readings this morning. The reading from Revelation is a common scripture read at funerals. The writer looks to the future. God speaks; *I am making all things new*. The promise of “new” comes out of the reality of death and tears and crying and pain. *The home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples*. In all that is new God will be present. This represents the fulfillment of the fondest prophetic hope that God and God’s people would find their mutual home in and with each other. The presence of God among the people of God means the removal of all human hurt. Everything that once pained us and brought us to tears will be gone.

While the writer is thinking about the future we are still on the journey. We live a day at a time. Yet, we are always part of the unfolding future. Future can mean days or weeks or years. The assurance that this text offers us is that be it joy or sorrow, be it success or failure, be it the expected or the unexpected, be it longing for or regret from, there will always be a “newness” to what is happening. The writer believes that in anything new God is the central figure. Perhaps we need to grasp, more than any other words in this passage, the assurance that God is *making all things new*. At a time such as this, when the tides of change are so vigorous this text can be a source of comfort. To believe truly that God is the *beginning and the end* of all that is taking place can be a source of strength and grace.

When we look at the Gospel lesson for this morning we encounter another “new”. The words this morning are part of the story leading up to Jesus’ death. They are in the upper room. Jesus has washed their feet. He has indicated who will betray him. The room is full of stress and pending sorrow. It is then Jesus says to his followers, ***I give you a new commandment.*** Once again we see something new coming at a time when “new” is not anticipated. He says it is ***a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.***

It may seem strange that Jesus uses the word, “commandment” and the word “new”. There is no implication that love was absent from their lives in the tradition of Judaism. Perhaps it was new in that the disciples were entering a new time of life in the world after Jesus’ departure. Perhaps the nature of their love for one another was to be new: they were to love as he loved them. If love is understood as acting toward one another as God acted toward the world and as Christ acted toward his disciples, then love is not simply a feeling. If love is a way of speaking and doing and being there for one another, then it is not strange to speak of love for one another as a “commandment”.

Almost every day we face challenges. There is something that is new or at least new to us. Some of it is welcome and anticipated. Some of it is born out of stress or disappointments. Some new stuff we deal with is the result of the attitudes and actions of others.

The message for us today is both tough and encouraging. It can be tough when what is new is what it is “new”. There is the new that is helpful and hopeful for us. There is the new that is destructive. And we have to sort it out. The encouragement for us is that from creation onward there will always be “new” and that God can be found in it, even in the struggles and pain of life.

I conclude with the words of a hymn we sang last Sunday.

I see a new heaven.

I see a new earth as the old one will pass away,

Where the fountain of life flows

and with out price goes

to all people who abide in the land

There, there where we work with the love of healing hands.

Labour we must, true to our trust

To build a promised land.

I see a new heave.

I see a new earth as the old one will pass away,

Where the fountain of life flows

and without price goes

To all people who abider in the land. (#713-Voices United)