

5 Easter C (April 24, 2016)

Something New

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How are you when it comes to new things? Are you curious or suspicious? Eager to learn or quick to criticize? Someone I love dearly and greatly respect is decidedly on the latter side. My father is a kind, generous person with deep faith and amazing creativity, dedication, and a loyalty to old school traditions. And before I go any further I don't want anyone here to misunderstand my intentions: I am not criticizing or attempting to put my father down. I love him and would not ever intentionally do such a thing. Instead, like all of us, my father is a human being, a man of exceptional faith and growth potential, and his story is one I hope can be a helpful and inspiring example to us all, because he is that for me.

As I said, my father has a love for old school traditions, especially when it comes to his business. My father, as many of you know, is a master plumber, he co-owns his own plumbing business with my mother, as well as several other small businesses he created. When it comes to doing business, my father's prefers to handle the bills the way he was taught by his mentor. The way that worked was my father or one of his employees did work that was requested, then he hand wrote a work report, his office manager wrote a bill from that information and sent it to the customer in the mail and the customer mailed a check. But that system had a flaw: when things got busy, my dad would get behind on those work reports and bills were not only slow to be sent out, they were slow to be returned. And sometimes papers would get lost, which became an income problem. To help improve this situation, the office manager suggested getting computers; a computer system that would help keep track of all that paperwork more efficiently.

My father was not schooled on computers. He did not understand them. He did not trust them. They were new, and he was highly suspicious and resisted such a change for years. Until he couldn't anymore. Until too many papers had gotten lost and too many bills were late and while he had plenty of work, the income didn't match up. So new computers were ordered and installed.

It wasn't long before things started to run more smoothly on the administrative end of my father's plumbing business. My father still hasn't enthusiastically embraced computer technology, but does see how that

technology can help improve his business and enables him to do more to help people, which is why he became a plumber and why my brother is becoming a plumber too. My dad learned the new isn't always something to be criticized or eschewed, sometimes the new is just what we need.

We heard a lot about the new in the Gospel and other two readings this morning. Starting with the book of the Acts of the Apostles where we heard the members of the early church were pretty critical of Peter for eating with and hanging out with Gentiles, which was a new thing for him and them. Remember the very first followers of the Risen Jesus were Jewish, and it was a controversy in the earliest church as to whether or not Gentiles should be accepted. They were like my father, suspicious and resistant of the new.

The reading of Revelation certainly seems a comfort when the author indicates that God will make all things new, even in the midst of suffering. This might remind us that throughout the Old Testament when people cried out to God, such as when God's People were suffering as slaves in Egypt or hungry in the wilderness God heard their cries and responded by doing something new in their midst so that their situation changed. God called Moses who led the people out of slavery, and showed the people how to find food called manna in the wilderness.

These two readings show us something important about God: that God is not distant, uncaring, or inactive in the world or in our lives; instead God is not only present, God is up to something, something new, something different, something perhaps even unexpected. Which might make us wonder if we notice God at work when something new comes along.

Our Gospel reading might help us understand how to recognize God at work in new things when we look at Jesus giving what the author of John's Gospels calls a new commandment: to love each other. Which might not sound all that new at first. We've certainly heard the commandment to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbor as ourselves before. So is Jesus' command really all that new? I've read one commentator who said they didn't think so at all.

Maybe what makes this command to love new is that Jesus told his disciples to love each other not as they love themselves, but as he loves them. Remember Jesus said these words after Judas left Jesus and the disciples because Judas had gone out to betray Jesus. In John's Gospel Jesus was well aware of Judas' intentions; and he did not respond by gathering the disciples together and

telling them to go after Judas and stop him from what he was about to do. Jesus didn't curse Judas or tell the other disciples to hate him, or take revenge on him. Instead Jesus told his disciples that they were to love the way he, the way Jesus, loved them. And that his dream, his vision, was that everyone, believers and non-believers would recognize one of Jesus' followers not by the clothing they wore, or the jewelry they displayed, or the car they drove or the school they attended. Instead a follower of Jesus would be recognized by the ways they show love and respect for God and for people by how they treat them, not just the people who are easy to respect, but the ones who are difficult to respect, the ones who hurt, who cause wounds, the ones who don't seem to care.

This is what makes the command a new one: to love not as we love ourselves but to love like Jesus. Because sometimes we might not be that good at loving ourselves; we might be too afraid or insecure or angry or hurt. Which is why the command to love as Jesus loves is important; because it is a love that promotes healing, forgiveness, and peace which everyone in the world, including us, certainly can use.

The best example I can think of that shows this new command is a story from South Africa during the heyday of apartheid. One day, a mother and her young son were walking down a sidewalk when they saw a white man in a black suit and white clergy collar walking toward them. Now, this mother and her son were black and the rule in South Africa during apartheid was black people had to step off the sidewalk whenever a white person approached and hang their heads in deference. This one time, however, it was the clergyman who stepped off the sidewalk and he tipped his hat to the boy's mother as a sign of respect. The little boy had never seen anything like that before, it was new to him, and asked his mother who that man was. His mother said he was an Anglican priest, and the little boy was so impressed with this new thing he saw, this love like Jesus loved he said, "That's what I'm going to be when I grow up." Not only did Desmond Tutu grow up to be a priest, as I'm sure you all know, he became a bishop and then Archbishop of South Africa and was instrumental in ending apartheid and has done a tremendous amount of work promoting forgiveness and reconciliation all around the world. All because one person lived into Jesus' command, all that new came into being.

When we love the way Jesus commanded, something amazing happens: we open the way for God to work God's new thing through us. This might be the Good News we need in days when we as a church are facing a world that does not

see the value in attending church like it once did; or respects people of religious faith like it once did. We may have heard some folks say the church is dying and point to declining attendance and shrinking budgets, and while these are real challenges, they are also times when we can remember God has answered the cries of God's people before, and God has answered those cries by doing a new thing. We might not always embrace those new things with enthusiasm, like my father resisted computer technology, but that doesn't mean those new things aren't God ways of reaching out to all kinds of people to show them God loves them.

In our personal lives this can be good news too; because when we find ourselves in the middle of struggles or when situations look bleak we can trust God can make something new, and if we are open to loving as Jesus loved we can be part of that new thing God might be up to. I'm not saying just because something is new that means it is automatically from God. That is another way love can come into play, we can be curious about the new thing and look for ways it invites to love as Jesus loved or shows the love of Jesus, as Peter explained in the book of Acts. His explanation helped his critics see that God was up to something new and they changed, they embraced the new thing and rejoiced.

Today we can look at how we respond to new things in our lives: if we are apt to be curious or critical or if we are courageous enough to look deeper for the love of God that may be at work through something or someone who might be different, or unexpected, or new. New can mean God is up to something. New can show us Resurrection Life and how God might be inviting us into that Life.