

## ***Taking a New Look***

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Song of Songs 2.8-13; Romans 8.11; Matthew 11.28-30

My great-aunt Gladys' husband, Arthur, was in the hospital. The prognosis wasn't good, and so my aunt was there pretty much around the clock. Toward the end, my uncle couldn't really speak, so he would write notes, and when he was alone with my great-aunt he would often jot a little love note to her. It was quite sweet, really.

One night, when my great-aunt was at Uncle Arthur's hospital bedside, stroking his fevered brow lovingly, Uncle Arthur got a look of panic on his face and quickly scribbled a note to my great-aunt. Without looking at it, she just smiled and placed it in her pocket. She would add it later to the other love notes she had been collecting during his illness.

That night, Uncle Arthur went to be the angels, and as Aunt Gladys was leaving the hospital, she decided to read her last note from Uncle Arthur. It said, very simply, "Gladys, dear, you're standing on my oxygen tube." The moral of the story is: even if we think we know what a text says, it may be worth it to give it a new look anyway. That's what we'll be doing today with our scripture readings.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a man named Galileo, a mathematician, scientist, and philosopher got into some trouble. He supported the Copernican notion that the earth was not in fact the center of the universe. The church quoted scripture and tradition to "prove" that the earth was fixed, stable, immovable, and central. Galileo's position contradicted the "authority" of tradition, and the protectors of that tradition were not amused.

Psalm 93 says, "God has made the earth firm, not to be moved."

Psalm 96 repeats the idea.

1 Chronicles 16.30 makes the same claim.

In the book of Joshua, there is a story of Joshua making the sun stand still, suggesting that the earth is central and stationary and the sun moves around it.

Galileo applied new information to his world view, but those who literalized and felt the need to defend the scriptures felt threatened. They responded fiercely, and Galileo, who was right, was forced by religious authorities to recant the findings of his study.

The keepers of power failed to realize that something can be true without being factual. The poetry of the psalms or the story of Joshua can be spiritually true even if they aren't in the end good science. The bible isn't a book how; it's a book of why. The bible can answer the "why" questions even when it fails to understand "how" things work.

And so, we continuously re-look at our sacred texts. We may think we know what they say, but the more we study them, the more we find new discoveries. The bible is not our idol, it is our dialogical partner, and out of our conversation with it, the word of God actually springs forth for our lives.

(1) Our first reading this morning is from the Song of Songs (aka Song of Solomon). The Song is full of earthy, lusty images that tradition has often ignored, or tried to clean up by suggesting all that sexy language was really a metaphor for a relationship between God and the faithful.

On close examination, we find the Song of Songs celebrating a love affair between two people who are not yet married, do not have children, come from different class backgrounds, and whose families oppose their relationship.

And yet, the lovers celebrate their love and their mutual attraction, claiming ownership of their own bodies and their own feelings while not allowing their families or society to dissuade them from being together and from celebrating their relationship.

The Song of Songs shows that the integration of spirituality and physicality is not some brilliant new fad that we initiated at the end of the 20th century, but rather is something that our ancestors had already known about and we have only rediscovered the sensual blessings that can be part of our spiritual lives. It is BOTH erotic literature AND sacred literature. This may seem like a new approach for some of us, but it is one that makes the Song of Songs very liberating and even relevant for us. Looking at it with a fresh perspective and an open mind gives the text back to us in ways that can help us celebrate our wholeness.

(2) Our second reading comes from Paul's Letter to the Romans. In it St. Paul blends Greek philosophy, Jewish Wisdom, and the newness of the Jesus Movement which he had joined, and tries to integrate those three traditions and make a case that this new approach to spirituality was worth embracing.

The Letter to Romans argues against doggedly following legalistic traditions, and insists on the liberating power of the spirit of grace. Since Paul was promoting a new movement, obviously he was no slave to tradition. He had been, but eventually he joined the new movement that would eventually be called Christianity. He was promoting something NEW! A new, fresh, progressive understanding of spirituality.

Paul had his critics, and still does (don't we all), but he courageously offered a new perspective and, following his example, we in the MCC movement offer new, liberating perspectives. It isn't always what we've heard before, but that's rather the point, isn't it?! We can be free from past interpretations that limited our creativity or discouraged our intellectual honesty or denied our innate dignity. We can live in the power of the spirit of grace, moving always forward.

(3) Finally, we heard a reading from Matthew's Gospel today. It was written about 50 years after Jesus' execution during a very turbulent and politically uncertain time. It, too, offers new ideas, new ways of looking at things, new challenges, new hope; and, like other new ideas and new movements, it encountered resistance.

Matthew is showing us how it is impossible to please the critics. In verses 18 and 19 of chapter 11, Jesus says, "John the Baptizer fasted and abstained from alcohol, and they called him demonic, I attend dinner parties and have the occasional glass of wine, and people who criticized John for being anti-social criticize me for being a glutton and drunkard and a friend of riff-raff."

Jesus didn't say John's way was wrong, or even that his way was better. He simply said, "John did things one way, I do them another, and we both have been criticized." They both threatened the status quo somehow.

Those who try to enforce a single interpretation of a single tradition are the ones who have perpetuated oppressions in the name of orthodoxy or unity. And yet, such legalistic attitudes are not liberating; on the contrary, they can become quite burdensome. They are like a yoke weighing down a beast of burden. But Matthew says Jesus' way is the way of liberation. Jesus' way may seem new or unorthodox or even scary, but once we have tasted the joy of its freedom, we discover that his way is light and joyous in comparison.

Every week, someone contacts me in pain because they have been rejected by family or church. Some bishop or pastor or parent has quoted the canons or the bible to let them know that the dogma is more precious than they are. I have even been at people's bedside at the hour of their death trying to convince them that they were persons of sacred value. They had been told that they had not measured up to some divine standard.

To those who have been wounded by the keepers of dogmatic traditions, Jesus says, "Come to me ALL you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest from the legalism that has kept you yoked, weighed down. My yoke is easy; my way of encountering the divine allows for freedom of thought and experience; my burden is light."

Matthew's message which he attributes to Jesus can be summarized in the 6<sup>th</sup> Point of Progressive Christianity, which says: "[We] find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes."

Our readings this morning each offer us the freedom to think about things, even matters of faith, in new, empowering, liberating ways. Rather than being yoked by the dogmatic assertions of the past, we can ask questions and dare to see things in new and refreshing ways. Legalism may have been heavy, but there is a new way, a way that is lighter, that is easier to carry, that allows us to learn new things and apply them in relevant new ways.

Never be afraid of new information, new ideas, new discoveries. The joy and excitement of such newness is what makes the yoke easy and the burden light. For us, this is the good news. Amen.  
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**I am renewed by God's unconditional love.  
I am renewed by God's spirit of grace.  
I am renewed by the unfettered gospel.  
I am hopeful, joyous, and full of life.  
And so it is!  
Amen.**