

SAYINGS OF JESUS
WHEN WORDS WON'T

Text on Sunday, September 5, 2010: *Luke 12: 57—13:9*

Where does what is new come from—the act or attitude or thought not rolling like a wheel in the ruts of our past, but new? The question is bigger than it appears. It is at the center of human being, like the energy in a tiny seed. In every conflict, in every uncertainty we face, there must come either: more conflict, more misery, or . . . something new, a way forward. If you struggle with your health, whether in your body or your mind or your spirit, either your struggle will become harder and more intense, or something new must come into it. In your marriage, if there is conflict, there will either be more, or something new. In your work, whether the conflict is in relationships or in your desire to develop yourself or the whole organization, that conflict and challenge will heighten, or something new must come. In the struggles of communities, whether as great as the nation or as small as a church, more struggle . . . or the gift of the new. Could there be a more urgent question than where the new comes from? To a person in the middle of a dark night, I have often said: There are only two options in the face of great uncertainties and losses, either misery, or spiritual growth. Where does the new come from?

The tired old answer to the question is, *From her. From him. From them. It'd be all right if my husband would just change. We'd be all right if that party would just shut up or shut down. Or, taking a leaf from Jesus' book, if that fruitless tree could just be cut down, those useless weeds torn out, that would be all the new we'd need. But it's not so, and you know it. The new must come through you, not just to you.*

Another tired old answer to the question is technology. Goodness, knows, technology brings new stuff into our lives, and some of it really changes how we interact. Now, an interview with an inventor about her experience of new invention might give us a glimpse of the source of the new, but her inventions do not bring anything new into the deep questions of our lives. They may bring us neat new ways to avoid dealing with the deep questions of our lives.

Have you ever sat and tried to have a new thought? Good luck. More to the point, who has never felt mentally assaulted by the same old thoughts, your brain like a wheel in a hamster cage, round and round? How repetitive most of our thoughts are! Is there anything new under the sun? Ecclesiastes thought not. Must we get our hope of the new on the lay-away plan, to be picked up by and by, in the sky? Let us not hold that forlorn thought. As summer comes to a close, and another fall awaits with its usual demands and its elusive promises and peculiar threats, I would like you to taste an idea which you may not have tried before. It is this. The question about becoming a channel for what is new is what real religion is for. Listen.

Again and again, Jesus warns his listeners that they are stuck in old ways that keep them in a kind of hell. They rely too much on systems and authorities leading them to think they know how things work. Too many words. *Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?* Jesus asks. Find it within. Instead, you turn to authorities to settle your conflicts and establish what is right. Earlier in Luke 12, a man asked Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute. Jesus' reply? *Friend, who set me as a judge over you?* You have abdicated the creative power within you to resolve your conflicts, says Jesus.

Now Jesus is listening to the news. It's the usual eye-witness-4 stuff—wrong channel for the new. Pontius Pilate has executed some Galilean Jews in a grotesque display of scorn for their religion. A tall building has collapsed, killing eighteen. *Do you think God makes these things happen to punish sinners?* Jesus asks. His question leaves no room to keep on thinking those old thoughts about God—and it makes me wonder where Pat Robertson's Bible was five years ago when he was explaining to us why God sent Katrina on New Orleans. In Jesus' story, these proto-Pat Robertsons think *they* know how God

works! Why, Jesus would jump right on board with Sigmund Freud to affirm that such a predictable old god is nothing but a projection of your own fear and judgment, congealed like concrete in old thoughts. Nothing new can come if you stay stuck in rigid patterns of thought about how things work. God cannot breathe a breath in such a one. Repent, says Jesus, or you will perish.

Now our old thought system flies into high gear. We think we know what it means to repent, and it does not bring us good cheer. We think we know what he means by perishing. Some of us may reject the ancient world view. Some of us may want to accept it—after all, it's in the Bible, and that's the authority—but either way, the sound and fury of “Repent or perish!” triggers in us old thoughts, old resistance, old reactions. Nothing new. Can this be Jesus' way? It cannot.

The word for *repent* in our Bible is unusual. If you have heard many sermons, your preachers will surely have remarked on it. *Metanoiete!* Something like *Get beyond your mind! Transform your thinking,* or surely you will perish just as you live, in a spirit of rigid, unforgiving, old thoughts and judgments. When words won't deliver you from your conflicts and challenges into a new spirit, a new mind, then you must move beyond thought. This is Jesus' message. I suggested that becoming a channel for what is new is what real religion is all about. Here's the source—and a curse on false religion, too. False religion channels old thoughts and fears up under the name of God. It abuses the name of God to nail in place every system of injustice and domination, personal and political. But Jesus says, *Metanoiete!* Get beyond your old story. Open to the channel through which God is sending God's new thing into the world through you.

How? If there was a lever to pull, a prayer to pray, a formula to fill in the laboratory of the church—it would soon be an old system and therefore a spiritual error. This is the tragedy of religion in human hands: too often we receive these ancient forms from our mothers and fathers in the Spirit as if they will work for us like incantations. But nothing on earth just plain works to bring the new into our old conflicts because there is no authority set up over you, to force you to work for it. *Metanoiete!* Get beyond your thought about how things work. The Eternal Will—the Divine Name—Ha-Shem—Reality—call this Life what you will—God requires that you participate in God's creation. Do not perish as if you were the victim of forces beyond you. Accept your authority, the gift of God Holy Spirit within. Become God's creator of God's world. How?

In the language of Christian faith, participation in God's creation is through relinquishment. Yes, when words won't work, when thoughts stay stuck, listen. Be wholly part of a community. Do you wonder why people join a church? To submit the self to a Body greater than thoughts can think. To take part. Do you wonder why we share in communion? Not from any theory about what will happen in heaven—but to take part, to have communion in God's Body, beyond all thought. Do you wonder why all the traditions teach meditation as a kind of prayer without words? Why, seven hundred years ago, the Christian teacher Meister Eckhart wrote: “God works without instruments or images. The freer you are from images, the more receptive you are to God's interior operation.” When words won't serve, you must go beyond them, and simply take your part in creating creation.

We are living into a world-historical crisis of change. The outcome of the conflict is not determined. It is between more technology and domination—more words, you might say—and discovering—enough humans discovering—the way of relinquishment. The path of *shalom*, the spirit of *Islam*—which means “submission.” Your participation in this church—*changing* church from what it was or what you feared—can be the channel for God's new thing on earth. For here, more intentionally than in any other organization you are likely to find, are the symbols and the practices that help you move beyond your thoughts, beyond yourself, beyond your past into the possibility of God's creation, when words won't.