

# OF BABIES, BATHWATER, AND BRIDGES!

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GENESIS 29:15-28  
PSALM 105:1-11, 45b  
ROMANS 8:26-39  
MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Proper 12  
July 30, 2017 ~ Year A



## **OF BABIES, BATHWATER, AND BRIDGES!**

*(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold!)*

**“Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater!”** We have all heard this oft used, perhaps overused phrase. It is right up there with **“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch;”** **“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth;”** **“Don’t take any wooden nickels,”** and so on and so on they go. In the Bible we might hear, **“The Lord helps those who help themselves.”** Nonsense! Or, we might hear that, **“The Lord never gives us or puts on us more than we can handle.”** Rubbish! Hogwash! And, of course my all-time favorite because I invented it, **“Every opportunity is an opportunity!”** **“Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater”** is an idiomatic, not to be confused with idiotic, expression derived from an old German proverb first recorded in 1512 in *Narrenbeschwörung*, translated as *Appeal to Fools*, written by Thomas Murner. This work even includes a woodcut illustration showing a woman throwing a baby out with the waste water. The popular saying has been in vogue in English since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps its most famous use was by Thomas Carlyle, who adapted the concept in an 1849 essay decrying the deplorable evil of slavery. Now as with many popular literary utterances, **“Don’t throw the baby”** developed its own mythological narrative. And, as any good student of the biblical narrative will acutely and accurately attest, as with any literature considered sacred

writ or to have holy properties, our own Bible is not immune to this phenomenon. “Some claim the phrase originates from a time when the whole household shared the same bathwater—YUCK—The head of the household, (the Lord, I guess you could say, or the king of the castle,) would bathe first, followed by the men, (of course; guys, would we have it any other way?) then the Lady and the women, then the children, followed (ironically and disgustingly I think) by the baby. The water would be so black from dirt that a baby could be accidentally ‘tossed out with the bathwater’” (Wikipedia). Others say there is no historical evidence to support this theory, making it what we today might call an urban legend! Finally, this is one of those iconic phrases that even has its own definition, “to get rid of the good parts as well as the bad parts of something when you are trying to improve it; to discard something valuable along with something not desired, usually unintentionally” (Wikipedia). And, that takes us to where we want to be as we look at Jesus’ five brief parables, mini parables if you will, and especially and particularly the conclusion he makes to those five parabolic phrases, creating therein a sixth parable in its own right, all of which I am sure have become as popular as the baby and bathwater idea! Maybe not!

Jesus mastered the linguistic trick, the art of simile for his metaphorical parables, allegories all, which seem to have been his most popular and effective teaching tool. You will remember well from that nightmare called high school grammar, that a simile is a phrase

that uses either “like” or “as” in making a comparison. We use them frequently throughout our conversations never thinking about the fact that we are employing a simile in the process. Jesus says, “The realm of God is *like* a mustard seed,” then explained what that meant. Ditto “yeast,” “a treasure,” “a merchant,” and “a net,” each one painting an image reflecting the inexplicable, unexplainable, unimaginable, mind blowing, mind boggling realm of God. Jesus then concludes these delightful musings by clarifying for his disciples the implications of all these mysteries, “Therefore,” he says purposefully, “every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple for the realm of God is *like*—there is that simile at work again—the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest.” Today I want us to think about the “treasure chest” that is the SouthShore United Church of Christ, full of the old and the new. But, in order to do so, I need one more parable, one more simile, one more metaphor, and this one in contemporary form. Sidebar: Jesus’ parables in the Gospels are bridges connecting one image with another to make a salient point, clear for some—those who are followers of Jesus—confusing for others, Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, and the like. So it was then; so it is now, I suppose! Today we are talking about babies, bathwater, and bridges.

As one writer notes, “There’s nothing quite as beautiful as a bridge. (I like to think of the new bridge built in Charleston a few years ago,

another in Savannah, Georgia, and of course, the Skyway here in the Tampa/St. Pete area.) Visiting San Francisco for the first time? You can bet you're going to want to see the Golden Gate Bridge. It's not the biggest bridge in the world, and built more than 75 years ago, it certainly is not the newest. But it holds you in thrall. Quaint expression, 'in thrall,' but that's what it does. You can stand there looking at it, and not really tire of the sight, and chances are, you'll whip out your digital camera (that is so passé) and snap a boatload of pictures. One of the newest and biggest suspension bridges, opened to traffic in 1998, is in Japan, the Akashi-Kaikyo bridge. It boasts a main span of 6,532 feet, almost four times the length of the Brooklyn Bridge—(another iconic structure). It stretches 12,828 feet across the Akashi Strait to link the city of Kobe with Awaji-shima Island. Each cable is composed of 290 strands, each strand containing 127 wires. The length of the wire used totals 300,000 kilometers, enough to circle the earth 7.5 times. Its two towers, at 928 feet, soar higher than any other bridge towers in the world." The writer goes on to opine, correctly so I think, "Because people love to reach across water and establish a link (and we certainly get that here in Florida) there will always be a human hunger to build immense bridges around the world. One current dream is to construct an intercontinental connection across the Strait of Gibraltar, (linking) Europe to Africa, by bridge. Planners are calling for a structure that would stand 3,000 feet tall and dwarf any existing bridge in height and length. Driving from Spain to Morocco, you'd cross a full seven miles of water." Hey, what

about our Seven Mile bridge linking parts of the Florida Keys? **Our goal at the SouthShore United Church of Christ is to build and to be an immense bridge, a strong bridge, connecting old and new, filling our treasure chest with all the congregational riches imaginable as beloved faith community. As—another simile at work here—with any bridge building enterprise, it takes a whole lot of effort, much intentionality, a heaping, helping of grace, and the determination of every jewel contained herein. It represents a monumental challenge placed before us. The jewels are us, by the way! Perhaps the biggest struggle we have faced together over the last three and a half years is finding ways to span—bridge image here— to span the old traditions and new innovations woven seamlessly, working effectively, perhaps not so effortlessly, bridging the paradigms of the past welded to the present and beyond, to a hopeful and fulfilling future as we are nudged more fully into the mere infancy of this 21<sup>st</sup> century, leaning into this postmodern period in which all of us now live and move and have our being, no other option available!**

**As you are all acutely aware, we have just concluded my annual evaluation as your Senior Minister. No wonder I passed out this morning! Come on guys, that one was just sitting there waiting for me! Many of you have filled out the congregational evaluation form initiated by our Pastoral Relations Committee that was sent to the entire body politic to assess the professional competence of the Senior**

**Minister. Rather than a sampling or a smattering of input, the Committee truly sought to get a sense of the whole congregation's feelings related to our mission and ministries, and so this was their method and instrument, the tool they chose to use, as is their prerogative, albeit a bit of an unorthodox protocol among United Church of Christ congregations. All of you had ample opportunity to participate, to engage in this process, weighing in with your personal and private opinions. As you are also probably aware, the process in and of itself created quite a bit of conversation, some commotion, even mixed with a hint of consternation within our midst. But, what could well be interpreted as frustration, even expressed as a level of anger among some congregants, thoughts and feelings expressed from each of the two major perspectives that currently guide our congregational journey together, I would rather describe these responses and reactions as passion, an intensity reflecting and revealing the love, the hopes and dreams of this special people who gather within these walls. Driving the engine of this beloved steeple, I would rather choose a glass more than half full approach, using a different adjective, because, as you are painfully aware, I am always full of adjectives. Call it what you will, what was made clearly evident is that everyone in this place cares deeply, is highly invested and tremendously concerned about the welfare of this church, especially and particularly its future. After tabulating the results, the consensus of the "evals" were pleasantly positive, though I would acknowledge not overwhelmingly so. In many ways, the**

evaluations reflect the ecclesiological diversity within our midst, a reality that sometimes tends to challenge more than energize our church. We do have within our sacred community two distinct visions of who and what we should be and should become! One thing we clearly have in common is that we are a highly opinionated people! Theologically, for the most part, we tend to be on the same page. In retrospect, I could invoke the Jekyll and Hyde imagery I used in last week's sermon to describe myself as pastor in this place, for indeed the responses are "all over the map," reflecting the good, the bad, and the ugly. No surprise there! That is the nature of the beast of pastoral ministry in any congregation. Despite the Apostle Paul's admonition, no matter the effort or how one tries, no minister can ever be all things to all people, but can only aim toward reaching what is an impossible, unreachable goal. I will continue to work toward that end, using every means necessary to the best of my ability, while keeping my professional integrity and personal sanity intact. **Many of the comments reflect likes and dislikes, preferences and objections, more than they assess a level of my professional competency. That being said, my sincere goal, my heartfelt desire, to the best of my ability is to continue to strive to build and maintain bridges between our staunch traditionalists and our unwavering progressives, to be not only a bridge builder, but to be and become the actual bridge itself. But, my reminder to you today is that this arduous task is not only my job as the man in the middle, but is the shared responsibility, the sacred work of each and every one of us combined, all working in concert**

**together toward a common goal, a mutually shared objective. As the gathered church in this location, a congregation of believers, beloved faith community all, we are as varied as the number of people that enter our doors and fill our pews.**

The responses in the evaluations represent not only a wide range of viewpoints about me, but perhaps more telling and more importantly, about the direction of our congregation. Folks, there were no wrong answers and no right answers for all the answers were valued, respected, and very much needed, viewpoints representing the whole of this body, the parishioners of this sacred space called the SouthShore United Church of Christ. Regarding these comments recorded in real time, they represent, and yes, reflect and reveal who we are in this bellwether, crucible moment in time in the life of our church, and perhaps even provide a hint, a glimpse, an indication of where we are headed and who we might well become. As we consider the information disseminated before us, informing us of our present state, our current condition, and of a future yet to be revealed, but unfolding daily in our very midst, may we learn from Jesus and remember that we are all in this together and that we need each other desperately for the living of these days.

**Perhaps that is what Jesus was intimating and where he was headed when he described the realm of God as a collection, an accumulation revealing both old and new things brought out into the open in full**

display for all to see, metaphorically imaged as the contents of a treasure chest. One of the greatest challenges that we seek to meet at SouthShore United Church of Christ is in honoring all things old and all things new and doing so all at the same time. Our goal is to never throw the baby out with the bathwater in our being and doing, in our becoming whatever it is as a church that the still speaking Spirit of God has in store for us. One of my favorite churches, the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, has a saying in its order of worship, describing itself as “ancient, but relevant.” I think that is a marvelous image for what we are and who we strive to be as the SouthShore Church. We value tradition, steeped heavily in the ancient liturgical forms created in the early Church, while using contemporary, contemporized language that expresses our growth and development, our theological and ecclesiological evolution as people committed to life in the steeple. Pulling off such a hard act does not happen by accident, without much intentionality. Most churches today either use the heavy, weighty language of yesterday, or they have abandoned altogether these rites and rituals and the formulas that frame them and give them structure, opting for what is called either “contemporary” or “alternative” worship, a particular style complete with projection screens and praise bands. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these practices because they appeal to significant numbers of people. The path we have chosen to follow, however, is neither one of those, definitely not a path of least resistance, but a narrow path that is challenging in multiple ways. It

calls forth from all parties a whole lot of grace and patience, with a heaping helping of tolerance and acceptance, with everybody gaining something while giving up something. The hope and prayer is that we all have a *Kumba Yah* kind of experience, all singing in harmony together! The cry from our masses that is frequently heard is that we are either too traditional or too contemporary, and, to be honest, frank and earnest, when we hear these concerns or complaints, ironically, we know we are exactly where we are supposed to be, doing what we are supposed to be doing. Everybody is happy and unhappy, satisfied and unsatisfied, motivated and miserable all at the same time. In order for us to be successful, living together in covenant relationship, it demands us being intentional as community, beloved faith community, even in the midst of any of our fears and anxieties, or our frustrations and preferred methodologies. We continue to learn to walk in one another's shoes, if only for a brief moment in time. Our continuing goal, one among many, is to never sacrifice one treasure for another, never throwing that proverbial baby out with the bathwater. And, before anyone can say it, yes, I understand that on some days, in all honesty, it appears as though that is exactly what we are doing, for I am leading us in an openly progressive direction. Leadership is never easy unless one settles for following the easy well-worn path of least resistance. The reality is that you and I walk by sight, hoping and praying we walk by faith with a boatload of grace. Life in the rearview mirror is always distorted and always a dead end, even though we value the view and hope and pray we never lose sight of it. Even when we can no longer embrace much of the tradition, both biblically

and “ecclesially”, we still seek to find ways to always honor the heritage and history that helped shape us and bring us to the place where we now live and move and have our being. We walk where the saints have trod, but it is now our steps that order our way, creating our own paths to sainthood.

**Bridge building is always difficult, always challenging, because it always takes place on what is, for all intents and purposes, a high wire act. Bridges are never built on the ground because they are not needed there, a complete waste, an unnecessary use of time and resources, totally impractical. Like the proverbial airplane built in the air that is the way we are building this sacred bridge.** One writer commenting on bridge building reminds the reader that, “. . . not all attempts to push the limits are successful.” Listen to this story. Some of you may even remember. “In 1940, the Tacoma Narrows (Bridge) in Washington State was hit by strong winds and collapsed, sending a 600-foot section of the bridge into Puget Sound. The roadway had been open to traffic for only a few months, and it took 10 years to redesign and reopen the bridge.” Perhaps you have seen footage of that disaster. “Only University of Washington engineering professor Bert Farquharson worried that the Tacoma Narrows Bridge was far too flexible. He began studying the bridge in an attempt to uncover what sort of modifications might improve its stability. According to *Mental\_floss* magazine (March-April 2005), he showed up at Tacoma Narrows on the morning of November 7, 1940, to film the movement of the bridge. His

timing was excellent. As he was shooting film, the bridge began heaving in the wind, and soon collapsed.” Absolutely amazing!

**Folks, it takes all our best efforts as we continue to construct this bridge between old and new called the SouthShore United Church of Christ, a solid and sturdy structure that will take us from our glorious and prosperous past allowing us to faithfully enter, to boldly seize a glorious and prosperous future. All of us must become bridge builders, honoring the past, living the present, while looking toward, anticipating the future, no matter our positions or postures, our preferences for being and doing church. It is risky business, that which we do together, this thing called church, fraught with danger and the occasional flare-up because it is a very human system seeking to be and do divine stuff! Remember what Jesus said elsewhere when describing old and new, old versus new. In each of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus talks about the perils of putting new wine into old wineskins. Luke tells us (5:36-39), “He told them this parable, ‘No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined.’ ‘No,’ Jesus says, ‘new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, (Can I get an Amen?) for he says, ‘The**

**old is better.” And, Jesus certainly proved that last point at the Wedding at Cana where he turned water into wine, making the good stuff, knowing that the fermented variety was the real deal coveted by everybody. Jesus knew the value of the tradition, the orthodox Judaism of his birth. Equally so, he saw the need for relevance, for reformation, to usher in a radical new message that was unique to Jesus, that he alone came bearing, but he knew even more the risks, the danger of mixing these highly flammable, highly combustible elements. Hear me church and hear me clearly, that which we seek to be and do here is not child’s play. It is not for sissies or the faint of heart!**

**Listen to Beverly R. Gaventa from a 1993 article, as she comments on today’s Witness from the Gospels in Matthew. It is as relevant now as it was then!** While I rarely employ such long quotes, I believe her analysis spot on for our present circumstances and situation, brilliant and worthy writing deserving of a fuller and lengthier hearing. **She says, “Whatever Matthew’s intention, 13:52 describes his work not only in this collection of parables but in the Gospel as a whole. Matthew presents the new, the person of Jesus Christ, as ‘God with us.’ Matthew also presents the teaching that is new, the community that is new, the mission that is new. At the very same time, of course, Matthew retains the old. The scripture of Israel, the prophetic traditions of Israel, the hopes of Israel all play crucial roles in this story.”**

**“Matthew does not simply place the new and the old alongside one another, allowing the audience to pick and choose between them. He weaves the two together in such a way that neither the new nor old can stand without the other.”** Do you get where I am headed with Gaventa’s idea? She continues, “How much sense would the infancy narrative of Matthew 1-2 make if we attempted to edit out the explicit and implicit references to the Hebrew Bible? What would become of the Sermon on the Mount without the authority of the ‘new’ Jesus to demand fulfillment of the law? Remove the ‘old’ and Matthew’s Gospel falls apart. Remove the ‘new’ and no Gospel remains.”

**“When we read Matthew’s story—or virtually any other New Testament writing—the integral relationship between old and new seems obvious to us. What is easy to recognize and acknowledge in the text becomes much more difficult as we attempt to move from scripture to the life of the church in the present. Here the relationship between new and old becomes a daily battleground.”**

“Some of us (perhaps all of us, from time to time) have an illness we might call ‘innovatio-phobia.’ A deadly fear of change makes us cling to translations we cannot even pronounce without tangling up our ‘thee’s’ and ‘thou’s.’ It prompts enervating disputes about the slightest shift in the order of worship. It manifests itself in our fear of acknowledging that contemporary experience may demand that we reconsider what it means to say that ‘God shows no partiality’ (Acts 10:34). ‘Innovatio-phobia’ takes a

very dim view of the new things that appear in the treasure (chest) of the household, preferring to live safely with the old.”

“Others of us (perhaps all of us, from time to time) have an illness we might call ‘traditio-phobia.’ Those of us who are victims of this illness measure everything by its congeniality with our own experience. Prayers of confession are outmoded because they make people feel guilty. Any text that speaks of God in masculine language is patriarchal and inherently oppresses women. The church’s historic creeds do not speak for me and my experience, so I shall edit them as I go along. ‘Traditio-phobia’ reinvents faith for every individual and in every circumstance, fearful that the past might exert some constraint on the present.”

“For both these phobias, of course, the gospel is still a treasure of sorts. On the one hand, it becomes a museum piece, something to be admired extravagantly but protected from any invasion by human hands. On the other hand, the gospel becomes as ephemeral as the ersatz treasure hidden in a box of Cracker Jacks—pleasant and serviceable but scarcely capable of sustaining either the individual or the community.”

“Matthew 13:52 may help us to recognize both these illnesses for what they are—blatant contradictions of the gospel itself. Not every new wind is a Nor’easter that will shake the church’s foundations. Neither is every stone in the foundation the makings for a prison. **Both the new and the old belong in the householder’s treasure (chest). Both the new and the old may serve the church. Both the new and the old may reflect the gospel**

of Jesus Christ” (*Christian Century Magazine*, “Both the New and the Old,” in “Living by the Word,” June 30-July 7, p. 669.)

In II Corinthians (4:7, KJV) the Apostle Paul tells his readers, “. . . we have (these treasures) in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” Folks, we are those treasures in earthen vessels. We are all jewels, even a congregational treasure chest made up of uniquely gifted treasure chests. Each one of us is a uniquely individualized treasure chest unto ourselves and in relation to others, the very image of our creator, the imago Dei of God. We have all we need. We are all we need to be and ever become beloved faith community, ever growing, ever expanding, radically inclusive, “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively hospitable. And, perhaps most importantly so, we all desperately need one another. So, in the immortal words of Isaiah, let us beat into plowshares whatever swords accompany us. Let us come and reason together as companions and colleagues, compadres all in mission and ministry, as we build and become the body of Christ, beloved faith community in this field where we seek to produce a magnificent harvest as Christ’s jewels, an amazing treasure chest of incredible capacity.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and is the God of the baby and the bathwater, always bridging old and new, ever embracing, ever creating. Amen and amen.

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