

“It’s The Same Old Song”
Psalm 98; John 15:12-17
Sermon 5/6/18

It was early June, 1965 and, in a few minutes time, I went from being a student assistant pastor to being an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. Although I had been preparing for this moment for several years, here I was at the formal doorstep of a 50+ year journey as a pastor, a journey that continues. So much has changed in the intervening years and yet one thing has not changed. Several changes in location, including a thirteen year shift from pastoral ministry in the local church to pastoral ministry for United Methodist Homes, and most surprisingly of all, the pastoral role at Jesse Lee, are the most obvious changes. Beneath the obvious changes are, hopefully, the reality of growth in ability, a deepening certainty of what I believe and of what priorities guide me, and a confidence that preaching and pastoring is more about loving people and witnessing to them that God, through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is the source of guidance for their lives more than anything else.

Why do I tell you these things? The other night when friends came over to the house to play cards, one of them asked how I managed to write a sermon every week. Another of them responded that he did not think it was too difficult. He said, (joking, I hope) “Jim only had to read one book, and he did that years ago. How hard can it be? It’s the same old song.” Actually there is some truth to that. At least that Book is the foundation. It is always where I begin. But as you can guess, there is so much more than that. When cards were done for another week, they left. I stayed and thought about the comment. I don’t know why, but my mind wandered back all those years. I was still four years away from marriage, living the life of “the bachelor” preacher, basically assuming I would always be such. I had friends and family. I totally enjoyed life, and was totally committed to the ordained life. Despite my certainty that I would remain a bachelor, I fell in love, got married, and had six children. I still totally enjoyed life. Then my wife died and I went back to being a single man, albeit with six children to finish raising and a mother who lived as part of the family and needed more and more attention. The thought of ever getting married again was easily dismissed. Then Barbara came along and I discovered I had fallen in love once again. Happily I still say, I totally enjoy my life. Once again, everything changed, but the certainty remained.

Loving and living as faithfully as I know how, seeking to remember the Love that called me, has at times wavered, but ultimately it remained unchanging. Jesus, the definition of love, the visible presence of the Divine Love we call God, was, and is

the certainty that made and makes every sermon I've ever preached possible. What has also not changed all these years is the awareness that Jesus consistently gave one commandment. The gospel writer captures it very well when he quotes Jesus, *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

My friend was right, it's not all that difficult to prepare a sermon. It is the *same old song*. The difficult part in knowing this is that it is accompanied by an awareness that preaching it is more difficult than living it. It is difficult to deliver the same message every week. It is difficult to sing the *same old song*. That is not simply true of the pastor, it is true for everyone hearing (or reading) these words. We are all called to the same certainty of that song. We are all called to witness to its truth.

The psalmist, likely after a decisive battle, is aware of the need to give thanks to the one who he believes gave him the victory. He knows the need to remember and the need to deliver it in a new way, a way that might be heard as an eternal certainty.

*O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory...*

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord,
all the earth;
break forth into joyous song
and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre
and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise...*

How do we praise the Lord, how do we make a joyful noise? How do we as a congregation sing *the same old song* in a new and different way? That is the challenge.

In so many ways we stop *singing the same old song* by engaging the world as it is, not by how we wish it still was. It is singing joyfully even in the face of realities at hand? Fifty years ago school shootings were rare. Drug addiction was happening, but it now has spread to our corner of the world. Climate change which causes so damage to all living beings, including the earth itself and the air we breathe, is now no longer a prediction. We can see and feel its effects. These, and so many troubling changes in civility have become a different *same old* song.

So how do we sing a *new song*?

We reclaim our certainty, our faith we have once declared, that *Love*, which is modeled in Jesus Christ, is still the guide for our lives. It is the *Love* through which *we can do all things*. It is that *Love* in which, and through which, we find a way to *Love our sisters and brothers*, and the globe on which we all live. It is by finding ways to increasingly become (cliche or not) part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. That is how we will create the *new song*, even as we proclaim the *same old story*.

Would you finish this sermon for me. If so, sing with me the first verse of an *old song* that is somehow always new. Sing it with joy and the certainty that we, you and I, can and will joyfully obey the commandment to *love one* another. For those who may not know, it is found on page 156 of the hymnal. It may be the *same old song*, but it is up to us to sing it even as we find new ways of living it.

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus
and his love.*

*I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true;
it satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.*

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*