As a young boy, I was encouraged to share ideas. In that regard, the one person who stands out is Harry Kay. At the time, Harry was the only lawyer in Eldon, Missouri. As a lawyer, he was one of the most educated, articulate and successful persons in town. Harry and Ruth were like second parents to me. He and my father were tenured deacons, side by side, and it seemed to me that these two couples were models of faithfulness for my home church. Harry died at 100 years old nearly 20 years ago.

There is a photograph taken on a camping trip with the Kay’s. It was a picture of Harry and me sitting on camping stools talking together. And while others were off playing, cooking or setting up camp, Harry and I were talking. And the others in our group dubbed the picture, “The Philosophers.” I was likely 12 years old at the time, and today I find it incredulous that this successful lawyer, probably around 70 years old at the time, would sit for several hours and talk to a young boy about politics, public events, religion…all kinds of ideas. Harry was about the only Democrat in an otherwise Republican town and so his were often alternative ideas. But what meant the most to me was that Harry seemed genuinely interested in my ideas, just as I was interested in his. He seemed to enjoy talking to me. He had such a kind and frequent laugh, such a gentle spirit, such a probing mind. He loved to philosophize, to spin out a good idea, and he seemed to enjoy doing that with me. All around us camp life was unfolding and we sat and philosophized.

I hope and pray that we can offer to the young people in our church opportunities for them to have quality conversations with mature adults 30, 40, 50 or 60 years older.

From my early days with Harry Kay and others, I learned how to listen to the ideas of others, and how to value an idea, even if it wasn’t practical. I learned not to fear sharing ideas, even if others argued with them, re-arranged them, or adopted them as their own. It was OK.

As a young adult, I was enamored with new ideas. I tend to spin out all kinds of ideas – ridiculous ideas, unworkable ideas and occasionally helpful ideas.

Some people are idea people; others are better at implementing, maintaining, putting hands and feet onto an idea. Some are initiators and others can keep things going. Some are thinkers. Some are doers. Some are both.

I love communal ideas. I love to see an idea enter a congregation and take on new shape because of a communal dialogue. I love to see how ideas take shape among and between people. Ideas can energize people and energize congregations.
As a young pastor, one of my early visions in Boulder, Colorado, was for that church to reach out to Hispanics living on the outskirts of Boulder Valley. Most of these Latinos were quite marginalized. I helped ten Front Range ABC churches from Boulder to Longmont, from Loveland to Brighton, sponsor a new social ministry and new church start with Hispanics. The idea was so exciting that I still remember, almost forty years later, the night it was given birth. We had invited the Hispanic Baptist pastor from Denver, the Rev. Sam Hill, over to Boulder to help us. In subgroups, we divided up the vision and came back together an energized people. God had worked a wonder through us that evening. Sam Hill and I formed a task group to give the idea a name: Project Desarrollo, the unfolding of a New Thing.

The only thing wrong with our new idea is that we forgot about a very old idea: racism. Another night I will never forget was when my congregation voted not to participate in Project Desarrollo, after we had already talked five other congregations into joining. A group of members of my church, led by two university professors, organized behind the scenes and recruited inactive members to attend a business meeting. Out they came to vote down the New Idea that we take a risk on behalf of this Hispanic ministry. “What makes you think they’d want our help? Aren’t most of them transient, anyway? Aren’t they all Catholics? Let the Catholics pay for it. And, they don’t even speak our language!”

I was confident God’s New Thing would prevail over such an Old Idea as racism. I was wrong. Racism won. It involved some other things besides racism: frugality, caution, mistrust of young leaders. But, it was also racism. What else is new?

Racism certainly isn’t new. As long as human beings have walked this earth, we have struggled with human difference. And we have judged one another negatively because of our differences. And we have used difference to put others down or keep others in their place. It’s an old, old human story.

Is there really anything new under the sun? The author of Ecclesiastes writes, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it is said, ‘See, this is new?’ It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come of those who come after them.”

It’s easy to be enamored with that which is new. In the books of Acts, it says, “Now all the Athenians would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” (17:21) And Athens was a city full of idols and pagan shrines. And as Paul entered Athens, he was distressed, and began preaching about a Living God not cast in stone or bronze. And “some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is? It sounds rather strange to us…”’ (17:18-20) They were enamored with anything new.

Is the author of Ecclesiastes correct by saying that there is nothing new under the sun? Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher said in 535 BC, “We never step in the same river twice.” Clearly one of these philosophers must be wrong.
When I was in seminary, I did everything possible to sidestep a requirement to take a church history course. I reasoned: who needs to know about the old things? I was concerned with the future, not the past.

But we can also get so caught up in the old that we just don’t get the new. Claude and Sara had been married several years and the glamour had worn off their relationship. They went to see a marriage counselor. After talking with the couple for several sessions, and seeming to get nowhere, the desperate counselor suddenly swept Sara into his arms and kissed her passionately. “Now, Claude,” said the counselor, “this is the treatment your wife needs…every Monday, Thursday and Saturday nights.” Claude said, “Well, OK, I can bring her here on Thursday and Saturday, but Monday is my bowling night.”

As fate would have it, when I was working on my doctor’s degree, the seminary assigned me Dr. Jim Nelson as my doctoral advisor, the professor in church history. By that time, I had changed my mind on church history and actually had taken two courses with him. Dr. Nelson’s office was beyond cluttered. There were only two empty places in his office, the chair where I was seated and the chair behind his desk. One day, he began questioning my doctoral thesis, and in defending it, I had said that my thesis involved testing several new ideas. That really enraged him. He picked up a book nearby and threw it across the room, aimed squarely for my head, shouting, “You haven’t had a new idea, Jones! You’ve never had new ideas! Every idea you have have been thought of by someone else hundreds of years before you! You are borrowing, Jones, not inventing!” And as he talked, he kept throwing books, and they kept flying by as I ducked. It was certainly an effective way to get my attention and to make his point.

Is there anything new under the sun? There are basic human themes, basic issues around which human beings have always struggled. Violence has been around since Cain and Abel. Racism and Sexism have been around for centuries. Skepticism has been around since Noah’s neighbors questioned his sanity as he was building his ark. Love and disobedience – the story of Adam and Eve. Cruelty and Deception: Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers. War and Peace: the Middle East since ancient biblical times. Birth and death: brackets around every one of our lives.

I look back now on my twenties and recognize my arrogance. All those New Ideas were not really all that new. Dr. Nelson, God bless him, was a lousy aim, but he was also right: I really hadn’t had a New Idea, for all my ideas were built upon those who have gone before. Nothing comes out of thin air. Everything comes out of historical context. We always stand on someone else’s shoulders.

There are universal human themes, universal human stories. You might even argue that there is only One Human Story and we each act out variations of it. But the human story is essentially the same.

At the cemetery, at nearly every committal service, I tell the Life-Story that we all have in common, and what I say goes like this:
Our life-stories involve birth, a painful, yet beautiful, ordinary, yet miraculous, helpless, yet promising beginning.
Our life-stories involve years of childhood, full of wonder, of discovery, of play, of imagination.
Our life-stories involve the adolescent years, occasions to discover our personhoods, of asserting ourselves, of dreaming and hoping.
Our life-stories involve the adults years, of accepting responsibilities, choosing vocations, and for many, finding a mate, rearing children...making tough decisions, and living out life-long commitments.
Our life-stories involve aging, the process of accepting ourselves as we journey through life, of gaining wisdom from life's accumulated experiences, of accepting our limitations and claiming our frontiers, of looking back as well as looking forward.
Our life-stories involve death, of moving behind life, of accepting what is more than we can ever know, of trust in the ultimacy of God.”

That is my story – and it is also yours. It is the “The Human Story.”

We call it “news” whether in the morning newspaper, on a computer screen, or TV news. But there isn’t much “new” in the News, just the same old things, the same tired issues, the same repetitive struggles. You can go on vacation, and take a break from the news, and come back to it, and it’s remarkable how little has changed.

What is old is our tradition, the Christian Story, in which we stand. While that tradition has some similarities to other traditions, it nonetheless comes out of a unique history, and the truth Christianity offers. What is old is our Scripture, the Old and New Testaments, which we continue to study today and which continue to have authority in our lives. What is old in our tradition are the keen minds that have told and articulated the “Old, Old Story.” Minds like Luther, Moltmann, Barth, Tillich, Rauschenbusch, Howard Thurman, Clarence Jordan, Henri Nouwen, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Joan Chittister…and so many others who have added such richness to our tradition.

I must respect the Tradition, lest I disrespect those with minds more keen than my own, hearts more passionate than my own, and lives more courageous than my own.

God is not New, but God enfleshed in Jesus Christ is a New Thing. An idea may be very old – over 2,000 years old. But an old idea embodied in our lives becomes something very new: that old idea has never looked quite the same as the way in which we embody it. We wear ideas. Ideas come inside us and take on fleshly form. This is what incarnation means: The Word Become Flesh.

What is new about this day is not our ability to invent Truth, or new Wisdom, for they are timeless, but that in the mystery and brilliance of the gospel, incarnated in each coming generation, we have the opportunity to live out our faith in New Life. Christianity has never looked the same as it does on us. The fact that Christ lives in us transforms Old Faith into something never before seen. We are not doomed merely to repeat old patterns, worn-out styles, repetitive choices. The Gospel re-invents itself in the flesh and blood of our new journeys.
Christ in us has never looked this way before. But what is New is not a repudiation of what is Old. Ideas may be old but embodiment of an idea is new!

Truth is not new. Neither is wisdom. Neither is evil. And it isn’t New that First Baptist Church of Kansas City finds itself standing at a Threshold. This church has stood in the threshold of change so many times in its storied past. What is new is you and me, allowing the Spirit of the Living God to enter into us and transform that which is, in fact, quite old, into something the world has never seen before. And when we allow that to happen, with Apostle Paul, we can proclaim, “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a New Creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Amen.