

Treasure Island: Fresh Wineskins

Mark 2:13-22

May 30, 2021

As we are emerging from the pandemic, we are relearning how to engage with one another after a long period of isolation. Mindful of the fact that this coronavirus will still be with us for a time, we continue new practices learned in the past 15 months. We are testing new dances with one another – six feet or three feet apart, masks or no masks, fist bump, elbow bump, handshake, or hug. Many are living into table fellowship again, but it is often with a healthy caution, respect for one another's comfort level, and outdoors when possible.

In today's scripture we find Jesus dining with some unlikely characters: tax collectors and sinners. Jesus disrupts the social conventions of his day. He dares to upend the typical social divisions in order to eat with all who long come to his table. His actions demonstrate that in the new reign of God, things are different. New rules replace old ones. Through God's work in Jesus, the customs of the past are transformed.

Jesus reiterates the same lesson when He is asked why his disciples do not fast. The reign of God is like a wedding banquet, a joyous occasion for celebrating the presence of God in Jesus. Instead of fasting in the presence of the Lord, Jesus' disciples are rejoicing with him. The time for fasting and mourning will come upon his death.

These are but two examples of the ways in which Jesus shatters old traditions and rules to inaugurate new customs and fresh ways that reflect the expansive love of God. It is challenging for us humans to relinquish our ingrained perspectives and live into innovative ways. We cling to that which is familiar and known; we don't like to be stretched to do things differently. I acknowledge that I can be rigid in my thinking, solidly sticking to what I consider right and wrong. It is difficult to pry open my mind to consider another way. But Jesus continually asks his disciples to stretch beyond our comfort zones. The expansive love of God knows no bounds, but our human minds tend to think dualistically in terms of good and bad, right and wrong.

Another illustration from Jesus has to do with wine and wineskins. In Jesus' time, wine was a staple drink. It was not often safe to drink water, so fermented grape juice was the drink of choice. Wine was also significant in the Jewish Passover.

In Jesus' day, wine was carried in wineskins instead of glass bottles. Old wineskins tended to be dryer and more brittle. New wineskins were more flexible & had more elasticity than old ones.

Old wine would have completed its fermentation process. It would no longer produce gases to expand the container in which it was stored, so putting old wine in old wineskins was not a problem. However, new wine was still fermenting and releasing gases that needed room for expansion. Old wineskins would split under the pressure, but new wineskins were flexible enough to expand as the new wine continued to mature.

Jesus is teaching us to be like new wineskins, open to what God is doing today. It's about being open minded. Our Christian faith is not a dead, static religion of 2,000 years ago. It is dynamic and alive. As our culture changes we need to grow, expand, develop, and reform all the time. Jesus is still working in the lives of his disciples today, right now, right here among you. Jesus' new wine is forever expanding and growing and always has a freshness. Jesus invites us to be open to what God is doing here and now, leading us to novel ideas, fresh possibilities, new wine.

Jesus' embodies God's compassion for one and all. When we fall in love with the God who loves us, that relationship colors the rest of our lives and all of our relationships. God's love precipitates a revolution of lifestyle. It will not do to put the new wine of God's love into the wineskins of our old behavior. When we dare to taste the new wine God produces, we burst out of the old ways and delight in the fresh new wineskins fashioned by the Spirit of God.

It would be easy to misunderstand and think that Jesus is saying the old forms are always bad and the new forms are always better. That is not true. Old wineskins and older forms can be very good and useful. But if we believe that they are the **only** wineskins and if we are not open to experiencing the new wineskins in our lives, we will miss out on some of the ways God wants to bless us.

"One of our biggest fears, and the cause of so much resistance to change, is that we think we are on the verge of losing, irrevocably, what we value from our past."ⁱ It feels as though embracing the unknown future that change and transition offer would mean losing all in which we have thus far invested our lives. The truth is that in letting go we aren't losing anything at all, because everything that matters has been internalized and is firmly lodged in your heart. It is yours. It is part of you. It travels with you and can never be lost. If we truly believe in resurrection, we have to let a cherished dream, a long-gone relationship, our

health, wealth, or beauty die. We can keep the old life on life support, striving to maintain the status quo, but to do so would be to distrust the mystery of resurrection in which new life arises out of what has been allowed to die.

As we live into newness on multiple levels, in society, in the church, and in our personal lives, let us trust that God is with us as we break from the former things and live into the new thing that God is doing in our midst. God is still active in the world and in our very lives, continuing to make all things new. While the essence of our faith remains, the Spirit is often blowing the church in new directions to meet the changing needs of society. If the church wants to remain relevant and vital, we need to adapt to new wineskins to share the story of God's love. As Easter people, we believe that there is treasure to be found in the new thing that God is doing. Let us rejoice in the resurrection power of our God.

Great is your faithfulness and bountiful is your goodness, O God. We give thanks for your ever-present compassion from morning until nightfall, from birth through adolescence and adulthood and into our twilight years. We raise our voices in singing praise for your goodness that runs after us all our days.

We rejoice with students who are graduating from high school and college. We celebrate their lives and accomplishments in spite of the challenges. Open broad vistas as they chart their futures, enriching their lives with abundant opportunities for growth and service.

In the midst of changing ways, refresh our trust in you, O God. Help us relinquish the control we grasp so tightly, thinking that we can run the world the way we want. Forgive our foolishness, and enlighten us to the adaptive ways in which You respond to the crises and needs of life. Help us relax into your graceful presence and deepen our faith in your abiding wisdom.

May the healing presence of Christ hover close to those coping with illness or injury. Send your Spirit of solace to comfort those who grieve. Shed your comfort upon all who are longing for balance in their lives. Send your encouragement upon all seeking recovery of employment, housing, & stability after the upheaval of past year.

We give thanks for those who have served our nation through the armed forces, and for those who sacrificed their lives. Shower their families with your peace. Abide with veterans who live with the scars of war. Teach us to grow in understanding that war may cease and peace will prevail.

Be present with leaders of our nation and all nations, that they might act with integrity on behalf of the people they serve. Guide us toward equity and justice that enables people to thrive

Guide your church, O God, that we might always be faithful to your call and purpose. When we stray, call us back to the way of Christ. Grant us courage to speak your truth in the face of the falsehoods others spread.

Mold & shape us after the likeness of Christ, that we might shine with Christ's light & love. We pray as Jesus taught us....

ⁱ Margaret Silf, *The Other Side of Chaos: Breaking Through When Life is Breaking Down* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011), p. 121.

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