

“Getting Ready for New Wine”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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Mark 2:15-17, 21-22

And it happened – Jesus was reclining to eat in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many of them and they were following him. And the legal experts of the Pharisees, seeing that he was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why is he eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” And hearing it, Jesus said to them, “Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. I came not to call righteous people, but sinners....No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth onto an old cloak. Otherwise the patch pulls from it, the new from the old, and the rip gets worse. And no one puts fresh wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the wine will burst the wineskins, and the wine is destroyed along with the wineskins. Instead, put fresh wine into new wineskins.”

Welcome back! We had a small crowd last Sunday with the terrible weather, and I’m glad folks stayed safe. And of course that terrible weather has continued, but life tends to keep moving anyway, doesn’t it?

This weekend life kept moving anyway when we had our Baptism Preparation Retreat Friday evening and Saturday – for the most part we got to stay cozy and warm inside, with a few little experiences outside that were, I’d say, fairly energizing.

It’s interesting to me that some themes of our class somehow ended up being the theme for this Sunday, as well. This Sunday doesn’t specifically have a baptism theme – that happened several weeks ago, in the Scripture story of Jesus coming to be baptized by John the Baptist at the start of his ministry. But, this Sunday’s theme *is* about something that comes up again and again when we study Jesus’ ministry, and how God works in the world, the same theme that came up a lot this weekend when we talked about baptism: **newness**. Transformation; new life; new possibilities.

Because of course, when Jesus is talking in this scripture story about new wine and old wineskins, it’s a metaphor. And that “new wine” isn’t the only thing that’s “new” in the story –

so is the way that he's doing things. The Pharisees and Scribes comment on it again and again in the gospels – in this case, it's eating with tax collectors and sinners. Not something that a Jewish teacher respected enough to teach in synagogues would have been doing. These people would have been "unclean", were pretty much despised in Israel because of their collaborations with Roman occupiers and the ways they took advantage of their power, and were almost certainly *not* sitting down to a kosher meal.

Newness – new wine, new wineskins; new ways of living – still religiously, still following God, Jesus said, but in a much different way.

At the Baptism Preparation Retreat we talked about new life, new languages, and resurrection. We learned what it's like to have a new baby in the house, and how *birth* is like what we do when we commit ourselves to following Christ. We learned about *school and foreign languages*, and talked about how being a Christian involves a new language with words that are important to learn to lead us as we live out our faith. And then, in the midst of learning about work and service, meals and community, play, and spiritual disciplines, we also learned about *death*, and how Jesus' death wasn't the end, but only a *new beginning*.

This retreat wasn't the first introduction to church that these young Christians have had. Each of them participating had grown up in the church. But, that didn't mean that they didn't have anything to learn. They came to the Retreat because they were curious. They came because they wanted to learn something new, and they wanted to be a part of the Church in a new way.

So what does this Scripture text about new wine, and the baptism retreat and learning about new ways to follow God, to live in the world, mean for us?

First, what's the *literal* difference between old wineskins and new wineskin, old wine and new wine?

“Wine would have been a staple in Jesus’ culture. Water was not often safe to drink so wine, or fermented grape juice, would be safer to drink. Wine also had tremendous religious significance especially at the Jewish Passover. So wine was a part of everyday life and religious ceremonial life during Biblical times. Wine at that time would have been carried in wineskins not in glass bottles. And everyone would have known the old wineskins tended to be dryer and more brittle than new wineskins. New wineskins were more flexible and had way more elasticity than old ones. Now, old wine would have been completely through its fermenting process and would not be producing any gases to expand the container in which it was stored. So putting it in old wineskins was not a problem. On the other hand new wine was still fermenting a little and would produce some gases that would need some room for expanding. Old wineskins would split under the pressure but new wineskins were flexible enough to expand as the new wine continued to mature.”¹

So what does that mean metaphorically, for us?

Jesus said “Put fresh wine into new wineskins.” Think about your mind as if it were a wineskin.

Our minds were built by God to be elastic and flexible, ever growing with new information. But if we look for new information, our synapses start to decay; in other words, they could become dry and brittle. And, we are already filled with wine - presuppositions and assumptions. Its how human brain works, how we function in the world, to build on the foundations of experience and knowledge.

But, we can also have a mindset of always looking for new possibilities, looking for transformation. Not pretending we have it all figured out already. In other words, stay curious.

Jesus said, “I came not to call righteous people, but sinners.” I haven’t come to call people who have it all figured out already.

¹ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_new_wine_new_wineskins.htm

He had new wine and their minds were brittle, not ready for expansion. They weren't *ready* to receive new possibilities, new life – in Jesus' context, Jewish leaders already have it all figured out. Not looking for new ways to do things, just trying to practice the laws that they have even better.

"If we are really honest with ourselves, I think we can admit that there are times when we act like the Pharisees. Times when we cling to our own traditions rather than the cross of Christ, times when we worry about outward appearances rather than what is inside the heart, times when we draw attention to our own needs rather than meeting the needs of others.

"It has been said that, whenever we draw a line to separate ourselves from others and then point a finger at those on the other side, Jesus is [actually] standing among those on the other side. Jesus dares us to cross the line...to reach out with love and compassion instead of strictly adhering to a set of lifeless, purpose-less rules and regulations. Jesus is calling you and me to step outside of our personal comfort zones. He is asking us to look at our own shortcomings...to see our blind spots...to see the times when we are just going through the motions and missing out on the new ways in which God is at work in our world. Jesus' words are life-changing for us all."

In the midst of the excitement about that newness, though, with this particular Bible story we've been dealing with, it would be easy to misunderstand and think that Jesus is saying that 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 even necessary. However, if we believe that the old wineskins are the only wineskins and we are not open to experiencing the new wine, new possibilities in our lives, we will miss out on some of the ways God wants to bless us.²

Jesus' ministry was often about *boundaries*.

The old boundaries cannot contain the new reality of God's reign coming near in Jesus. God's invasion of this world is resisted by those who hold power, whose lives are dedicated to keeping

² http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_new_wine_new_wineskins.htm

boundaries intact. For the rest, God's invasion is welcomed as a mission of liberation, healing, and life.

There is both threat and promise in these stories for us. Breaking down boundaries that we are desperately trying to hold in place. Yet this boundary-smashing Jesus is our only hope of deliverance from all that holds us captive.

Where might you need some boundary-smashing? What do you think you have all figured out, that Christ might be inviting you to look at differently? Is it a particular person? Is it a particular way of doing things? Is it a group of people, or an idea?

If we want to get ready for new possibilities that God has for us, for us as individuals, for as a congregation, we have to stay curious. What might happen next, if we let go of the boundaries that we might have been keeping hold of? What if we, who have been attending church for a while, like the kids who came to the Baptism Preparation Retreat, still came with open minds, curious about new language that we could learn, constant transformations and resurrections?

There's another story about wine that applies – the story of the wedding at Cana, the miracle that Jesus performs in the Gospel of John. Wine is running out at the wedding, there's not enough of this staple item. Jesus takes something of which there is plenty – water – and transforms it. At its essence, features of it have stayed the same – it is still a liquid to give sustenance. But now it is different. It provides a richness that the water did not have, served a role that the water could not do for this occasion.

What if we think of *ourselves* as not only wineskins that need to stay elastic, ever ready for new possibilities to come to us, for us to take advantage of that will fill us, but also as the water to be transformed into wine – something that at its core is good and necessary, but that can also be infused with *richness* in order to transform it for the occasion that is before us?

Next Sunday our Senior Pastor will return to this pulpit, and he will have new life, new vocabulary, new possibilities for us to take in. We have an occasion before us, and we can take it up with the richness of new wine, the elasticity of new wineskins, *ready, curious*, excited to find out about what new thing God is calling us to.

Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.