



New Wine for New Wineskins

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 2:18-22

April 18, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to Jesus, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

Several years ago I was with a group of students visiting with sisters and brothers in the Presbyterian Church in Nicaragua. We were there visiting the rainforest in Northern Nicaragua and helping support the church's new venture in eco-tourism. The Bosawas biosphere reserve takes up nearly 15% of the country and is the largest rainforest in Central America. We arrived in Managua, the capital city, to spend the night before traveling to the north. The next day was Sunday so we went to church. I was privileged to preach through a Spanish translator (thank you, Jesus). That Presbyterian church had a roof but no walls except the back of the chancel where there was a beautiful, colorful mural. After I preached, the pastor told me there would be several baptisms of infants. I remember wondering where the baptismal font was—you know, the kind that we have with a bowl on a stand. I thought perhaps they were just going to bring out a bowl and hold it. You

know, how we Presbyterians baptize, like we just did this morning with George Robert Killough.

So I was surprised when it came time for the baptisms the families came forward and the pastor rolled out a small little coffin filled with water. Then we prayed together and each of the families brought their infants up and unwrapped them from their blankets and the pastor took the babies—naked as the day they were born—and held them up above his head and said to the baby, "Hoy estás muerto el pecado (today you are dead to sin)" and he plunged the whole baby into the coffin filled with water.

Then, as the pastor brought the baby up out of the water, he yelled, "Hoy estás vivo en Jesús Cristo (today you are alive in Jesus Christ)." This went on for each of the infants. And the congregation was laughing and cheering. The music was jubilant. The families were clapping and beaming, and these beautiful little brown naked babies were screaming! It was unlike any Presbyterian baptism I had ever experienced.

That afternoon back at our guesthouse, it was all we could talk about. Together, we came to two conclusions. First, theologically, it was brilliant. It was exactly right. In baptism, we are dead to sin and alive only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Second, culturally, for a bunch of African-American and Asian-American and Anglo-American Presbyterians, it was terrifying.

Last Sunday our pastor Sally Wright told us that as Easter people, people who follow the risen Christ, we are new because God makes all things new. Because of Easter, because of our baptism, we are dead to sin and we are alive in Jesus Christ.

So right away in Mark's gospel we have a problem. You see, there is a tension here between old and new, between tradition and transformation. Tradition is

important; Jesus never says otherwise. But people have noticed that Jesus' disciples are not following the same rules as the disciples of John the Baptizer and the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. They follow the old rules—the tradition. They do what they have always done. They are good Presbyterians.

But Jesus has come and is changing everything. Not for the sake of change itself, but because he is offering a new way to salvation through grace, not through the keeping of rules. Jesus is making all things new. And there's a problem when you try to mix the old ways with the new ways. Jesus says, when you have a hole in your clothes, you cannot try patch it with a new piece of cloth because the new cloth will tear away at the old. And when you have new wine, you do not pour it in to old wineskins because the new wine, as it ferments, will burst the old wineskins. Jesus makes all things new. The resurrection of Jesus Christ makes all things new—even for the church or perhaps especially for the church.

Friends, we are making plans for returning to worship at Village on Antioch and Village on Mission, for reopening our buildings for in-person ministry. And as we come back together, it would be a mistake to think that Jesus is not making us new. Even during this pandemic, over these 13 months, we are being made new. Oh, my goodness, I am so proud of you... how you have dug so deep during these weeks, demonstrating remarkable resilience and finding the Holy Spirit within you to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to reach out and care for others, doing your best to be the church of Jesus.

But do not be deceived, O Church. The Easter Jesus, he is on the loose, as our pastor Hallie Hottle likes to say. And he is making us new. He is transforming us to be even more faithful.

Several years ago when I was teaching at Columbia Seminary, we had a day-long retreat with the board of trustees, the administration, and the

faculty. Now, I have to tell you: this is not a favorite event for the faculty and some of us went into the day with a less-than-positive attitude. That morning, we had a speaker, a religious sociologist, who was talking about the future of theological education. He discussed some of the challenges he saw ahead for seminaries and he presented a lot of trends that basically said we had to change a lot of what we were doing. At the end of his lecture, during the Q&A time, one of my faculty colleagues asked him what he thought was the greatest challenge ahead. And then the speaker said, "recognizing that you need to change." And then he used an image—just like Jesus did with the new and old cloth and the new wine and old wineskins. The speaker said, "A lot of you are so comfortable, so entrenched in this institution, you don't even realize that you're riding a dead horse." Then, one of the board members spoke up and said, "You know, when the horse is dead, it's a great time to dismount."

I was sitting next to Walter Brueggemann who is a brilliant Old Testament scholar and he leaned over to me and said, "That guy is smart. That was worth the whole day." When the horse is dead, it's a great time to dismount.

Tradition is a gift. Tradition is the living faith of the dead. It is how we are living out the faith given to us by our forebearers. But when the love of tradition stands in the way of God making us new—transforming us to be even more faithful—then tradition becomes traditionalism and like all "isms," it becomes a problem. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. It is going through the motions. It is doing something not because it has meaning now but only because we have always done it.

We are coming back, O Church. And we will be new. Because the risen Christ is making us, his body, new. Remember: "Hoy estás muerto el pecado y estás vivo en Jesús Cristo."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.