

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Old and the New**

Luke 5:33-39

Being a follower of Jesus was anything but boring. The crowds that gathered to hear him were attentive and energized. People's lives were being changed. The sick were being healed. The poor and the hungry were being uplifted and fed. The outcasts were being welcomed. Promises from the past were being implemented in the present. There was a certain aliveness about Jesus and his movement.

But what some perceived as aliveness, others perceived as deadly and disruptive. I preached last Sunday about the disruption we've experienced during COVID-19, particularly the ways it has affected our life as a congregation, a religious community. But sometimes, rather than being the object of disruption, religion is the source of disruption. That's the way some people, including many of the religious leaders, interpreted what Jesus and his followers were doing. They were unsettling and undermining some of the traditions that had sustained the life of God's people for centuries.

Take fasting as an example. Fasting, along with prayer and almsgiving, was one of the fundamental practices of Judaism. Pharisees fasted twice a week. In today's text from Luke, their piety is set over against the perceived laxness among Jesus and his disciples. Some of those gathered with him at Levi's house challenge Jesus, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking?" (v. 33). Where's their spiritual discipline? Don't they have any respect for tradition?

Jesus responds by saying that there are times when fasting is appropriate. It has its place, for instance, during a service of confession or an occasion of mourning. But according to Jesus, the primary tone of his ministry is less like a funeral and more like a wedding. True, being God's people includes practices of sorrow. But the arrival of God's reign of justice and peace means that the main mood is celebration. The announcement of God's good news to the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast generates joy. As I said, being a follower of Jesus is anything but boring.

And yet, the life of the church is often perceived as just that, especially our worship gatherings. There's an episode of the British sitcom *Mr. Bean* that pokes fun at the lifeless worship so many people experience in church. One person summarizes the scene this way:

The scene opens as Mr. Bean slips into a church service during a hymn. The tune is incomprehensible, and the stoic people mumble the words without an ounce of passion. Mr. Bean cannot even find the right page in the hymnal, and by the time his neighbor shares his hymnal, the song is over and everyone sits in unison.

Mr. Bean settles into his pew with a smile on his face, anticipating the sermon—but the rest of the congregation blankly stares straight ahead. Then the preaching begins in a nonsensical *blah blah blah* monotone that is hilarious—the preacher sounds like the teacher on the old Charlie Brown specials. But even funnier is the congregation—their eyes are locked in

position, and the only sign that they are even conscious is the occasional eyebrow that they raise at Mr. Bean.

As the sermon proceeds on endlessly, Mr. Bean fidgets, dawdles, and distracts himself to the annoyance of those seated nearby, until he finally succumbs to the boredom. His eyes roll into his head, and he nearly collapses into slumber, only to jerk himself awake at the last moment. The sermon plods on, the people stare on, and Mr. Bean tries to fight off sleep again. But this time he fails completely. He slumps further and further downwards, eventually sprawling onto his neighbor's lap and finally onto the floor.<sup>1</sup>

Drowsiness never seems to have been an issue for those who experienced and participated in the ministry of Jesus. On the contrary, his ministry awakened many to a new reality that had arrived on the scene through him. This new reality is the kingdom of God.

Jesus employed various means of communicating this reality to his hearers. One of his favorite methods was the parable. A parable is a figure of speech, often in the form of a narrative. In today's text, Jesus uses a parable to make a comparison between the old rituals and the new sense of life that comes with the kingdom of God. In other words, they're can't be any accommodation between the old and the new. The kingdom of God is greater than anything that has come before it.

Jesus declares that who he is and what God is doing through him can't be fitted into past patterns of piety. In fact, these have become so entrenched that they actually hinder the extension of God's grace to others. According to Jesus, the difference between the old and the new is like trying to tear up a new garment in order to make a patch for an old one. You're just ruining the new garment, and the patch won't even fit or match the old garment. Similarly, you wouldn't pour new wine into old wineskins. As the new wine ferments it will give off gas and stretch the wineskin. If the wineskin is old, dry, and brittle, it will break instead of stretch. You'll lose both the wine and the wineskin.

Jesus then wraps up his teaching with a bit of humor. He says that those who drink old wine usually prize it more than the new, which, in one respect, makes sense. When it comes to wine, older is often better. But when it comes to God's kingdom, that's not how it works. The newness of God's saving work in Christ surpasses what has come before it. So preferring the old wine can keep you from experiencing the benefits of the new.

New cloth, new skins, new wine. There's an aliveness about these things, an aliveness that can't be contained or controlled by previous patterns of piety. Part of what this means is that we who are following Jesus have to beware of taking traditional practices and making them the be-all and end-all of our Christian life, individually and together. Sometimes rigidity sets in. We start to prize our organizational structures, our patterns of worship, and our religious rituals more than we prize the life-giving power of God at work through Jesus. In short, we fail to distinguish the wine from the wineskins.

We've been given, and have received, this great and good news about God, coming to the world in Jesus Christ, reconciling us to himself and to one another, launching his reign of justice and peace, and promising to make all things new. Yet we often confuse the message with the method. We take old and familiar ways of doing things and treat them as the "gospel." We spend a disproportionate amount of our time patching the old garment or preserving the old wineskins.

Stuart Briscoe tells about an English minister who announced during worship that the offering would be devoted in its entirety to the extermination of dry rot in the pulpit and worms in the pew. Reading the announcement beyond just its literal sense, Briscoe says,

“Whether the problem be worms in the pews or owls on tombstones, we need to ask, ‘How is it possible for a message as electrifying as the Christian gospel to be presented in such a way that it is greeted with something less than euphoria and responded to with something less than enthusiasm?’”<sup>2</sup> There are times when we disciples of Jesus need to rediscover and reclaim the aliveness and the potency of the good news we’ve been given.

Speaking of pews, we haven’t experienced any worms in ours. But we have recently noticed some cracks. It began when we discovered some major structural weakness in the second pew from the front. We didn’t want to run the risk of having any of you get injured by sitting down and collapsing to the floor, so we brought in the skilled hands of Don Posey, who has been working diligently over the past few weeks to make repairs, not just to that pew but to some others that have needed reinforcement. For those of us who’ve been involved behind the scenes in Don’s work, you’ve seen what it takes to uproot a pew, flip it over, make repairs, and then secure it back in place. The whole experience has been a reminder that in the life of the church, some of the things that we think are so unchanging may not be as permanent as we think. After all, what could seem more solid, invulnerable, and immovable as a pew? And yet, even that part of our church’s heritage and tradition needs examination, maintenance, and renewal. If a pew can be unbolted and flipped, who knows what else Jesus can turn upside down in our church?

Remember that our congregation, like every church, is animated by the aliveness, the dynamism, of Jesus, in the here and now. That doesn’t mean God’s past work in us and among us is insignificant. It doesn’t mean that our history and heritage are negligible. It doesn’t mean that our rituals and traditions need to be tossed aside. But it does mean that the disruptive reality of God’s kingdom, present in Jesus, is the greatest and most important thing. So to keep first things first, we have to stay vigilant as to when and where and how our patterns and rituals have become master instead of servant. We have to beware of how our traditions turn legalistic when they get disconnected from a sense of God’s grace, mercy, and generosity.

Reflecting on the death of Jesus, Dorothy Sayers has written, “The dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and hero—if this is dull, then what, in Heaven’s name, is worthy to be called exciting? The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe.”<sup>3</sup>

May God keep us from trying to take Jesus and turn him into a Savior who’s just safe. He’s too dynamic for that. He still comes to us telling parables about new garments, new wine, new wineskins. As I stressed in last week’s sermon, the disruption of the past two years has created an environment in the church where innovation can enhance and extend our proclamation of the kingdom. Here in our own congregation, we’re in the process of exploring ways that we can take something that’s old, the gospel, and express it, announce it, in new ways, here in our community. This is an important time in the life of our church. It’s a season when we can learn more about how to distinguish the wine from the wineskins, and how to, when necessary, find new wineskins for the new wine. May the living Lord continue to show us how.

<sup>1</sup> *The Best Bits of Mr. Bean*. Chapter 9, “Can’t Stay Awake in Church.” (Universal Studios, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> D. Stuart Briscoe, *A Passion for Preaching* (comp. by David Olford). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, No. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Dorothy Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life*, by David Coomes. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 37, No. 9.