

New Skins for New Wine

Texts: Mathew. 9:14-17; John 3:1-10

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 25, 2020

When Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, he signaled that his ministry was about transformation, so we've been looking at what transformation and spiritual growth look like in the pages of the Bible. We know it takes time, just like it takes time for a mustard seed to grow into its full potential; and we know that sometimes it takes being knocked to the ground to understand that we aren't the spiritual giants we might think we are, as Paul found out on the road to Damascus.

We saw in the courage of Ananias that a sign of spiritual maturity is the ability to love our enemies, but the one thing we haven't really looked at is what is needed both externally and internally to kick off the actual transformation process. So, today I want to look at a couple of other passages that help us fill in that gap.

First up is a series of metaphors from Matthew 9. But they could just as easily be taken from Mark 2 or Luke 5 because the same metaphor is used in all three places in roughly the same context, early in Jesus' ministry. In all three places Jesus is fielding a question about why his disciples don't fast like either the Pharisees or the disciples of John the Baptist. Since fasting is what Jews did to signal mourning or repentance, Jesus' first answer is that nobody fasts at a wedding. Then he seems to shift gears and adds that, if you sew a piece of new cloth onto an old garment, the patch will shrink when you wash it and pull away from the rest of the clothing; and if you put new wine in old wineskins you'll burst the skins and lose the wine.

The point of all three examples is that a new thing requires special care and attention. Sometimes that means setting aside the rules—so you don't fast at the celebration of a new marriage, for example. And it also means you can't just throw the new thing into something well-established or you're going to mess up both the new thing and the old thing.

What isn't as clear is the point of reference. Biblical scholars fall roughly into two camps on this. The more common one is that Jesus is talking about Judaism vs. Christianity—that Judaism is the old, brittle skin and the new wine Jesus is offering needs a new faith to go with it. That interpretation is an example of what is called supersessionism, which sees Christianity as better than Judaism and moving in to take its place. In that view, Christian faith supersedes Jewish faith. That is yet another root of antisemitism in Christian culture and misunderstands what Jesus and Paul both teach in the pages of the Bible. As a reminder, there are no Christians in this story. Christianity as a faith apart from Judaism doesn't exist for more than a century after the biblical story comes to a close.

The interpretation I find most convincing is one articulated by the 16th century reformer John Calvin, which is a rarity for me since I am definitely not a fan of John Calvin. But he suggests that the new thing for which the rules need to bend and for which new cloth and new wineskin is needed is not Judaism, but rather Jesus' fledgling disciples and the process of spiritual growth they have just left their jobs to explore.

Consider the context. This passage comes at the outset of Jesus' ministry, and Jesus has just called Matthew from his tax booth, a detail that is the same in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In all three places the question about fasting isn't about whether Jews should fast. Jesus is being asked by the disciples of John the Baptist why they and the leadership have to fast while Jesus' disciples don't. In other words, we're all Jews, why are your disciples getting special treatment?

Jesus is not advocating for replacing an old faith with a new one. He is saying that his disciples—whom he has just pulled from the ranks of uneducated fishermen and corrupt tax collectors—are so new to any religious practice that the containers for mature faith are unsuitable. The growth of these new folks not only will do harm to the container—which is still perfectly suitable for mature wine and cloth—but it will ruin the newcomers as well. Their time for fasting will come, he reminds them, it just isn't now.

On a practical level this is an issue I've seen for decades as churches in the US have tried to grapple with adults coming into the church who increasingly have little to no background in faith. When I was on the staff of a 3,000-member church in Florida, I was charged with developing a new worship service on Saturday nights that would be an accessible point of entry for those unfamiliar with church. There were few traditional elements in the service, and we had sincere and heated debates about whether Communion should be served, because some believed it would be a stumbling block to those considering Christianity. Our debate was not about changing the faith; it was about the container for that service and whether what I was creating left enough space for the stretching, pulling, and questioning that naturally accompany spiritual growth.

I've also seen it play out in Bible studies, where those who may not even own a Bible have tried to engage with those raised on its stories since childhood, often resulting in discussions that pull the new cloth apart from the old on the first wash and help no one. So, interpreting the wineskin and cloth metaphor as a reference to the newly-minted disciples instead of to a new and separate faith that would not exist for more than a hundred years makes much more sense to me, especially given the context in all three gospels.

If you put the concept back into the seed metaphor, it's like reminding people that if you're starting a plant from seed, you might need to keep it in the house until it has enough of a root system to survive outdoors. We saw a couple of weeks ago that even Paul, who had risen through the religious ranks to become an expert in Jewish law still had to go back to Tarsus for twelve years after his conversion before he was ready to be sent on his first missionary journey.

But there's still a piece missing. The new wineskin is only needed for new wine, not water. What is it that changes the water into wine? What makes a seed fertile enough to grow roots in the first place? What is it that needs to happen on the inside of a person to jumpstart spiritual growth? That's where John's gospel comes in. The particular illustration about wineskins and cloth doesn't occur in John, but there are some interesting parallels at roughly the same point in Jesus' ministry. In the first chapter of John, Jesus calls his first disciples. Next up in John 2 we get the wedding at Cana we talked about last month. Jesus turns water into wine, giving the message that his ministry is about transformation. Then in chapter 3, where you might expect the wineskins and cloth, Jesus tells Nicodemus that what is needed is a new womb for a new birth.

Nicodemus, like Paul, is a Pharisee, but unlike Paul, he is part of the Sanhedrin, the religious body in Israel that held political power in religious matters. It would be the Sanhedrin, which was always led by the High Priest, who would later put Jesus on trial and authorize Paul to go to Damascus to arrest Jesus' followers. Nicodemus has been raised in the faith and has risen into its highest ranks as a religious leader. The context lets us know that he is a bit nervous about being seen with Jesus, because Nicodemus comes at night. But we should also remember that this is the gospel of John, where everything is written on multiple levels. One of the key metaphors throughout John is the contrast between light and dark. The fact that Nicodemus comes at night indicates that he felt he needed to speak to Jesus in secret. But it is also John saying that Nicodemus is metaphorically in the dark.

Unlike some of Jesus other encounters with Pharisees, this one is amicable. Nicodemus addresses Jesus with respect by calling him “Rabbi,” and what he presents isn’t a question or a challenge. He simply says “We know, that you are a teacher who has come from God for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Presumably that “we” means at least some of the other Pharisees and leaders. Okay, so that’s nice but why are you here, Nicodemus? He doesn’t say and none of the other gospels has this story or even mention Nicodemus to give us any more clues. All we have is John telling us that Nicodemus is in the dark, and that becomes clear shortly.

Jesus famously responds, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (Or, “born again” as it can also be translated.) That metaphor throws Nicodemus for a loop. The Pharisees were legal experts, so it’s easy for him to slip into a literal interpretation of Jesus’ words, which he does, making him sound pretty silly. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Come on, Nicodemus. You’re sounding like a member of Congress.

Jesus sets him straight. Spiritual birth, Nicodemus. We’re talking Spirit. In a physical birth you are born with water as the mother’s water breaks. You need that, you need to be physically born from those waters, but if you want to really see what’s going on, you need an equivalent spiritual birth. “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit.” Nicodemus is still baffled. “How can these things be?” at which point Jesus sees that he has his work cut out for him. “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Jesus clearly expected more than he was getting from the upper echelons of the religious leadership.

If he wants to grow, Nicodemus will need to put aside all the complexities of faith—the comfortable old cloth that he has been interpreting for others—and crawl into a new, limited yet expandable space. There he will need to forget what he thinks he knows and become a spiritual embryo that can develop the capacity for spiritual sight, movement, and understanding. Once he is “born again” with that new spiritual capacity, then he will gradually become wine; the new wineskin will expand, the new swaddling clothes will be washed again and again, and he will be able to truly understand all that he learned before.

We see in Paul that all his training and study as a Pharisee and all the disciplined practice of his years of faith didn’t need to be trashed. He just had to put those things aside for a while as he underwent a new birth into spiritual understanding. Once he had that—which, remember, took over a decade—all his training and study came back in a rush; and with new eyes to see it, God could use him to change the world.

For all the hoo-rah around being “born again” in our culture, Jesus is not saying anything different to Nicodemus in John 3 than he said to his disciples in Matthew 18:3-4, when they were arguing about who was the greatest in God’s kingdom. “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Being born again is not about saying some magic words; and if we are fortunate enough to have someone paying as much attention to our spiritual development as to our physical development as children, we typically won’t have a dramatic knocked-off-your-horse moment later. It still takes time to mature, but we’ll only need one wineskin and one piece of cloth because physical and spiritual maturity are all happening at once.

However old we are, whatever our station in life, we have to grow spiritually like we did physically: We have to begin at birth. If our spiritual growth didn’t track with our physical growth; if the learning of our minds outpaced the learning of our hearts; if we learned to judge but not to love; we will need a new birth, a spiritual birth. We don’t yet belong with the nicely aged wine or, like Paul before his conversion, we will do more harm than good.

We must find the humility to accept a new childhood of faith, to step back and learn from gentle souls like Ananias or humble fishermen like Peter, even if we are wealthy and educated and are recognized as a leader in our field. We can just drop our nets and go like Peter, James, and John; we can grow into it naturally like many of the prophets and as it seems Ananias did; or we can be hard-headed and self-important and wait to be knocked to the ground like Paul to understand. But if we never do it, we'll spend our lives in the dark. Amen.