

New Wineskins (Matthew 9:14-17)

The Scripture text for today captures a moment relatively early in the public ministry of Jesus. He was gaining a reputation and a following, and people—in this case disciples of John who preceded Jesus—were still trying to figure him out. He had already done some remarkable feats and taught in ways that were clearly different from what they had heard before. In addition to this, he didn't follow some practices they deemed necessary for the people of God. In this instance it was the practice of fasting—later this came to include other practices collectively known as the “tradition of the elders.”

Jesus replied to their question with a question that seemed to suggest that fasting didn't make sense in light of the present situation—and that must have been puzzling to them, but then he continued by talking about the insensibility of putting a patch of new material on old, and of pouring new wine into old wineskins. And while they would likely have agreed with that, I wonder if they reflected on the broader meaning behind it? Even if they hadn't, Matthew wanted his readers, primarily Jewish Christ followers, to do just that, to see that Jesus had spoken about his mission, his work, and had essentially said that a new day had dawned calling for a new approach to being the people of God, meaning that the ways to which they had become accustomed, or indeed had inherited over time, were no longer sensible in light of what he was announcing. The new life Jesus offered could not simply be poured into old forms, rituals, or traditions—they were not made to bear it, for its essence is greater than its props.

This text continues to speak into our lives today for it reminds us to keep pace with the Spirit of Christ who is always drawing us into deeper conversation with Christ and greater engagement with the cause of Christ as the embodied continuation of Jesus in history. What Jesus announced—the accessibility of living in God's life presently—is our experience. And by grace empowering us, we are living the most sensible approach to life by way of agreement with the teaching of Jesus, to the end that we are both the demonstration and announcement of what God intends through Christ for the sake of the world and to the glory of God. To be united with God through Christ is a dynamic, rather than static experience, for it is the fullness of life lived in the moment amid all the contingencies that surround it in our time. As these contingencies shift and move, we adjust and adapt in the energy of Christ's Spirit leading us, to retain our core identity as we retool to meet the challenge of mission—conveying the presence and message of Christ in ways to which our particular culture relates.

But the problem we come up against is our tendency towards packaging, or summarizing dynamic experience into something more static and manageable—a form or practice or ritual or system. Though originally designed to convey a deeper meaning, in time through repetition, the form or practice becomes what's meaningful instead. So we become attached to form and lose sight of function.

Friends, this happens in congregations on a regular basis. In some cases, you can track the life-cycle of a congregation through shifts from dynamic life to inertia on the basis of attachment to forms or systems, where loyalty to these drains the energy of a congregation trying to pour new wine into old wineskins. The truth is, new wineskins are an investment for the future. It takes time for wine to age properly—the winemaker preparing today's vintage is looking forward to a market in two, five, or ten years. The same calculus applies to congregations—those which now, in concert with the Spirit of Christ, put energy into different methods, new systems, strategic ministries are investing in the future—they are making themselves ready for a harvest yet to come. And, honestly, this is hard work, for it's not as though congregations close for a period of time, and then have a grand re-opening when they're geared up. It's a work in progress that happens through what some have called a mixed-economy approach where attention to present need and form continues while new life and systems emerge alongside it to meet the future bearing down upon it.

Congregations can stall in their progress when institutional memory distorts reality. Heritage is to be cherished, but there's a fine line between honoring one's history and being chained to it. There's nothing wrong with remembering good from the past, but when we

assume that this still exists, when it doesn't, that's when reality bites. Our congregation has a great history. We've been a large, active community with plenty of volunteers to staff a range of programming for all ages. We've had a huge children's department, and lots of great youth events. We've had choirs that filled the loft behind me. We've had very active men's and women's ministries that have done lots of great work. There was even a time when we annually presented a full Christmas theatrical production for the community that packed the house several times each season. In terms of what people considered typical when they thought of a local church, we ticked all the boxes. In some of our minds, this is still who we are, and for others familiar with our history this is who we want to be again. Friends, this is who we were, but we're a different congregation now than then.

Apart from the regular shifts that occur in typical congregational life, we're slowly emerging from the effects of pandemic that has had a dramatic effect in the way we function as a congregation. From the beginning we were prevented from gathering together which is a determinative and determining feature of congregational life. We adapted to the online experience of our life together and managed to stay somewhat connected. Along the way we picked up some friends in far away places and we're delighted with that and hope to continue these friendships. But one of the effects of long-term virtual "church," is that's its easy to shift into a consumer mindset—we tune in to get what we need—we consume religious goods the congregation is offering and the convenience factor gets in the way of our formation. Now, I realize that some families in our congregation have concerns for the safety of their children who are not yet able to be vaccinated so they remain online. And I also realize that some of us are immuno-compromised which adds another layer of concern to gathering. I want to assure you that our staff is vaccinated and we're instituting a policy that all volunteers who work with children and youth are vaccinated. We're creating as safe an environment as we can for the purpose of inviting return to gathered events. Yet one of the aspects of disruption to congregational life is that we don't have a good way of knowing who is still part of our faith community. This affects our ability to consider how to offer even a minimal level of programming since we're unsure of the size of our volunteer pool. Couple this with the hiccup of institutional memory that believes there is a sizable number of folks who will serve, and you can see the dilemma.

Let me get a bit more candid with you. The reality is that we're in a place not unlike starting a new congregation. There are a couple of points of departure to consider when starting a new congregation. One begins with the idea of a church—what do we need to build a church? Objectives from this perspective lean towards programming—we need children and youth programs, we need educational opportunities, we need organization or leadership, and sometimes it involves getting a building. Then, of course, we need folks to take care of the building, so we need a stewardship drive to raise funds. The product, from this perspective, is a church replete with programming and an attractive campus featuring compelling worship services that builds membership. The marketing campaign suggests: this is what you get when you join our church.

The other point of departure is a kingdom perspective. What's the product in a congregation with a kingdom perspective? I don't want to be crass about this, but the product is you—Christ followers who display in the way they live life, the sensibility of living by the teaching of Jesus. What do you need for this to happen? Not much, but you do need folks who are invested in one another. You need folks who come to worship not for what they get, but what they bring for the benefit of others. They along with others bring themselves before God, drawing near by grace, to honor God with their praise and thanksgiving for the life given them, who listen with others for God's Spirit who leads them in the songs sung, the scriptures read, the prayers prayed, and the messages given—who listen to hear, the root of which in Hebrew is to obey, to agree with God's voice directing them, to encourage others in their journey of faith, who come to give of themselves in time, abilities, and finances for the purpose of participating in mission—the work of Christ—and to demonstrate dependence upon God for all of life's need, who serve Christ directly in the work they do, and indirectly by serving Christ in one another. This is a unified community who collectively encourage and support one

another in living out the teaching of Jesus, who love one another, recalling that love means desiring and working towards the well-being of others, who by their interest in one another contribute to each others' formation in the likeness of Christ, who are concerned for each others' wholeness—emotionally, physically, and spiritually, who express solidarity with one another—the sense that I am with you in your situation and life experience, who together consider how to carry out the mission of Christ proclaiming the kingdom of God, for loving the world for which Christ died, and to offer his life to those who would receive it—to invite and include them in the blessing of Christ.

A kingdom perspective asks: who is here—in whom can we invest? With whom shall we together serve in the mission of Christ? What are our opportunities, and how will we proceed to meet them? The answers to these questions are the new wineskins, the new ways that Christ's life is kindled among us. And the marketing campaign? It's simply you, living the beautiful life of Jesus every day, blessing others in the course of your day. People will want to know the truth that sustains your life.

Friends, we're a different congregation than we've been in the past—we're not better or worse, just different. These questions are as valid for us now as they've ever been. And it's not as though we don't have folks doing kingdom work. Imagine the impact of a congregation filled with people passionate for the kingdom! But it is the work of the people, together. AMEN