

LIFE TOGETHER _____

1) “New Wine for New Wine Skins”

Matthew 5: 17-20 / Matthew 9: 14-17

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Imagine, for a moment that you are living in the City of Antioch in year 90 CE, a mere two decades after the Romans sacked the Holy City of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. As a faithful and observant Jew, you were stunned and horrified by the reality of life without the Temple. It had been epicenter of your people and your way of life. It had, in so many ways, been the glue that held you together. The great stones of the Temple that now lay scattered in the rubble, were a tangible reminder that the old order of things was no longer.

Without the Temple and the order and direction that it had brought to everyday life, there was now, chaos, confusion and uncertainty. There were some among the observant who insisted that the only way to remain faithful was to uphold the traditions of the past and to keep the letter of the law. They were suspicious of new sectarian movements and especially suspicious of the movement of those who identified themselves as followers of the Galilean—Jesus of Nazareth.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, the movement of Christians had continued to grow and what had once been a rag-tag band of followers, had now become a force that was taking the countryside by storm. To be sure, this force has impacted your life in a powerful way. After hearing the stories of Jesus and his announcement that the Kingdom of Heaven had come, you were intrigued enough to want to know more. And the more you heard, the more you learned, the more you were convinced that he was the Messiah, the “Anointed One” that you and your people had been waiting for.

So it was that you and your family chose to become a part of this movement, this “Christian” movement as it was known. At first, it didn’t seem as if this choice required that much of an adjustment. It all seemed to be a part of the Jewish tradition that you had known all of your life. Yet, as time passed, there was an increasing tension within this movement. Many assumed that it was necessary to observe the Jewish law and ritual to be a Christian. Men, for example, were expected to be circumcised as an expression of their faith.

But there were others in the movement, including the prominent leaders, Paul and Peter, who had suggested otherwise. They let it be known that circumcision wasn’t necessary in order to be a follower of Jesus. Well, you can begin to see the outlines of the collision course that stretched before these two movements. With each passing year, the tension seemed to grow and the split between the synagogue and the church continued to widen.

When you gathered with other Christians for worship within your small community of faith, you would often wrestle with the deeper questions of your day...

- *How did the choice to follow Jesus fit within the outline of the law and its tradition?*
- *Was it necessary to observe the law in its every detail? Or did Jesus change that?*
- *What was the relationship between the tradition of your people and the new teaching of Jesus? Was it possible to observe both?*

It is against this backdrop of question and confusion that the writer creates the collections of stories and teachings that will become known as the Gospel of Matthew. While we do not know for sure who the actual writer was, we do know that he was a Jew, well versed in Jewish teaching and the Jewish way of life. Not by accident, his Gospel is divided into five sections or books—not unlike the five books of the Hebrew Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Clearly, Matthew intends for his readers to make a connection between the traditional teaching of Moses and the new teaching of Jesus. In Matthew's eyes, Jesus is the "new Moses" and the emerging Church is the "new Israel."

As our first scripture lesson affirms this morning, it was Matthew's premise that Jesus had come not to abolish or negate the law, but to fulfill the law. Indeed, in Matthew's mind, Jesus was the fulfillment of the long awaited hope of the Jewish people. He was the "Anointed One" of God, the Messiah who had come to fulfill all righteousness. This, of course, is a theme that is repeated throughout the narrative of Matthew's story.

It is likely that Matthew's primary audience was a Jewish-Christian community in Antioch—a community that understood and valued the tradition of Judaism, but was also exploring just what it meant to be followers of Jesus in this "post Temple" era. This was not an easy assignment, by any means.

In the last twenty years, we have heard a great deal about the "paradigm shift" taking place in our own culture. Sociologists and those who study such things have suggested that, in this post-modern era, the old institutions and the old rules that once governed our culture, have begun to unravel at the seams. We can, of course, observe this unraveling in the experience of the institutional church which was once held a dominant and presiding place in our cultural landscape. I grew up in a world where Sunday morning was set aside for Church and everyone seemed to accept this as a "given." In some states, there were "blue laws" that helped to enforce this cultural reality.

In the paradigm shift that we have witnessed in the last three decades, that world no longer exists. Sunday morning is no longer set aside for worship, but is viewed by many, if not most, as

providing another opportunity for youth sports leagues or whatever else happens to attract that their interest

Perhaps you can begin to see the parallel here, between Matthew's time and our own. The void that has been left by the loss of the authority of institutional religion has been filled with a variety of perspectives, opinions and practices. And where this is all leading is decidedly unclear. Bill Easum has suggested that we are living in a "crack in history" in which the old ground rules have been overturned and new ground rules have yet to be put firmly in place.

Now, whether or not you agree with that premise, I think that you will agree that we live in a time of tremendous change—a time in which we are being challenged to "re-think" our faith as the United Methodist Church slogan would have it... a time in which we are being called to better understand just what it means to be a person of faith, a follower of Jesus, in an uncertain and uneasy age.

As we move through the Gospel of Matthew during our Lenten journey, I believe that we will find, along the way, the wisdom and insight of Jesus that speaks not only to Matthew's world, but to our world as well.

In our lesson, this morning, from **Matthew 9: 14-17**, we have a teaching that provides an ideal starting point for our Lenten study and journey. Our passage begins with some confusion on the part of the disciples of John the Baptist, as to why they and the Pharisees often fast and the disciples of Jesus do not. Jesus replies that, "the wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them." He then suggests that the time for mourning will come when the bridegroom is taken away—a vague reference to the time in which he will be taken away from his disciples.

With the table set, Jesus then proceeds to provide what represents one of the key teachings of Matthew's Gospel. Using the metaphor of a wineskin, he suggests that no one in their right mind would take new wine and place it in an old skin—because the old skin would burst open. No, said Jesus, new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.

Now, the meaning, to Jesus' listeners, would be clear. His "new teaching" of the Kingdom of Heaven" and its invitation could not possibly be captured by the "old wineskins" of the law and its tradition. God, in Jesus, was doing a new thing that could only be grasped by using a new lens for understanding the role and place of the law.

But there is more to it than that. Jesus then adds one noteworthy little phrase: "**So both are preserved.**" This addition, which happens only in Matthew's Gospel, makes it clear that, in Jesus' understanding, both the old and the new were to be preserved. It wasn't a matter of either / or, but of both / and. The new teaching of this new Moses did not negate or dismiss the old teaching of the old Moses. In the eyes of Matthew, Jesus had come to fulfill the law—to

build a new understanding and a new interpretation upon its ancient foundation. And we see this new interpretation unfold in the course of Matthew's narrative.

In a time and place in which we are experiencing the ongoing discussion and debate between proponents of the old and advocates of the new, there is wisdom in allowing these words of Jesus to inform and shape our understanding.

As United Methodists, we recognize and celebrate the importance of our tradition. With John Wesley, we celebrate the gift of the ways of thinking and living that has given shape and substance to the faith we now hold. We honor the great hymns of our past and sing them with gusto. We lift up the wisdom and insight of Wesley and Albright and Asbury—not to mention Peter and Paul and Jesus. We have, I think, a healthy appreciation for our roots and the nourishment that they provide. And we are grateful for the gift of the tradition that has been handed on to us.

But, as United Methodists, we also recognize and celebrate the importance of personal experience and the understanding that God is a God who is doing a new thing; a God who communicates and inspires in new ways.

So it is that we create new songs for worship and celebrate the wisdom and insight of contemporary writers and artists. So it is that we recognize that in a world that is constantly changing and evolving, we must also change and evolve if we are going to communicate with this world in ways that are relevant and understood.

While some might insist that it is so, we can never allow the tension between the old and the new to be solved by the equation of either / or. The wisdom of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew could not be more timely or appropriate. Both the old and the new, the traditional and the contemporary must be preserved. Indeed, it is by retaining the roots of our tradition that the vine of our contemporary witness can continue to flourish and grow.

As was the case with Matthew's world, ours is not an easy world to live in. In this age of paradigm shift, there is change and the challenge that comes with change. There is uncertainty and confusion. And from our "crack in history," the future is by no means clear.

And yet, in the midst of the upheaval of this time, we have this faith... a faith that serves to remind us that although that mountains be crumble and the hills turn to dust, the love of the Lord will stand. We have this faith that understands that even in the midst of the confusion, God, through the Spirit of Jesus the Christ, is at work, fulfilling our ancient hope and satisfying our contemporary longing.

Thanks be to God for the tradition that provides us with a solid foundation.

And thanks be to God for the opportunity we have, in this moment of time, to build upon that foundation as we create expressions of faith that reflect in the ways in which God's Spirit is at work in our lives, making all things new. Amen.