

Mark 2:18-22 August 6, 2006 Wine and Wineskins

The sermon in a sentence: Old values and ways of thinking are inadequate once we become citizens of the kingdom of God.

Why I am preaching it: As an aid to examining ourselves and our congregation, and the habits and values we have brought into the kingdom of God.

“The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” Those were Jesus’ first recorded words in Mark. Week by week we have been seeing what it means that the kingdom of God has come near. We have seen that the kingdom of God means forming a new community as Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, James and John, and even the tax collector Levi. We have seen that evil spirits flee when the kingdom comes near. The kingdom includes physical healing, and authoritative teaching from God. It includes the forgiveness of sins. All of this is included in the kingdom of God, or what Jesus refers to as new wine in today’s passage.

You would think that everybody would be thrilled that the kingdom of God had come. But at the beginning of Mark 2, when Jesus forgave and healed a paralyzed man, a very strange thing happened. The teachers of the law began to turn bitterly against Jesus. In this morning’s sermon we will look first at the old wineskin of tradition that prevented Jesus’ opponents from entering the kingdom. Then we will consider old wineskins or old habits and values that might hinder Jesus’ work in us or in our congregation.

Jesus and his disciples were not following the traditions of the Pharisees and other religious leaders; in this case, they ignored the tradition of fasting. Jews only had to fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees, however, had developed the tradition of fasting twice a week. We don’t know much about John’s disciples, but apparently they fasted as well. People fasted as a sign of mourning, of repentance for their sins, or as a way of seeking God. Some people were understandably disturbed that Jesus’ disciples did not fast. After all, weren’t they supposed to be seeking God, just as the Pharisees and the disciples of John were?

Jesus answered using three simple illustrations. But beneath his simple illustrations there lay a shocking message.

First he talked about a wedding. I resonate with this example, because Becky and I were married here at Makiki 34 years ago today. Wedding receptions

did not just last a few hours, but sometimes for several days. People in Jesus' day loved weddings just as much as we do. A wedding celebration was the last place that anybody would expect to fast.

Do you see what Jesus was driving at in this first illustration? People fasted as a sign of mourning for their sins, and because they were seeking God. Why didn't Jesus' disciples fast? Because in Jesus their sins were already forgiven, and in Jesus God had come among them. They did not need to seek God, because God had already arrived! The Old Testament sometimes pictures God as the faithful husband, or the bridegroom. Jesus may be hinting at his divinity here. His mention of the bridegroom being taken away is the first indication in Mark of Jesus' upcoming death on the Cross.

So Jesus answered their question about why his disciples did not fast. With his arrival, everything had changed. Fasting was no longer needed, and would not be necessary until he was taken from them. Then he expanded the teaching with two related illustrations. Wine and fine clothing were both part of any wedding celebration. We know that Jesus' first miracle involved turning water into wine at a wedding feast. We remember, too, how he used wedding clothes in at least one of his parables. So these two further examples really build on the picture of the wedding that he began with.

All of Jesus' listeners would have understood his point. They did not have pre-shrunk cloth in those days. If you put a new patch on an old piece of clothing, what would happen if you washed it in hot water? The new cloth would shrink and it would ruin the whole garment.

People carried their wine in animal skins, not in bottles. A new skin was soft and flexible, and new wine bubbled while it was fermenting. A new wineskin expanded as the wine bubbled. But with the passage of time, the wineskin became rigid. It was still useful for transporting old wine. But an old wineskin could not survive the pressure of the gases produced by the new wine. Both the new wine and the old skin would be ruined if you tried to force the one into the other.

The Jewish traditions that had grown up around the Old Testament Law were like the old wineskins. They were not the right receptacles for the kingdom of God. But people resisted change then, just as they do today. It will come as no surprise to us as we continue in Mark that the keepers of the

law finally come to the point of wanting Jesus dead rather than having their traditions challenged.

If we stopped here, we would have to say that this little story is interesting historically, but it does not apply to us today. Within a few decades of Jesus' death and resurrection, most of the Christian church had already ceased to follow the Jewish traditions. The issue of those traditions was settled long ago. So how does Jesus' pointed lesson on wine and wineskins affect how we live as his followers today?

You may remember a few weeks ago that we looked together at the story of the paralyzed man who was healed. We tried to get into the text, to apply the text by putting ourselves in the place of the teachers, in the place of the paralyzed man, and then in the place of the crowd. That is a form of Bible study that can help us get at the practical application of biblical passages with lots of action.

But this morning's passage doesn't have much action. It is more a conversation. Let me introduce you to a way of approaching this kind of passage that might help us to get at the meat of it. Read it through a few times, and choose a word, or a phrase, or a verse that captures your attention for some reason. Think about that word or phrase. You might pray and ask God what it has to do with your life or the life of your congregation.

When I did this, I kept going back to the new wine and the old wineskin. Jesus' opponents brought their old wineskin of tradition, and it couldn't hold the new wine of the kingdom of God. I began to wonder what wineskins I might have brought into the Christian life. What hindered the work of God in me? A number of incidents came to mind. As you listen to them, see if you can figure out what old wineskin is interfering with the work of Jesus.

When I was a senior in high school I had a job that paid the minimum wage of \$1.25 an hour. I was happy to have that work. But my best friend, Art, got a job that paid \$1.30 an hour. Five cents an hour wasn't much, but it kept bothering me. It took away some of the pleasure of my job to know that he was making a few cents more. It wasn't a matter of injustice. We were doing different jobs with different employers and different responsibilities. But it just bugged me that he was getting more than I was.

The next year I enrolled in the University of Hawai'i, and came to faith in Christ. Later I began seminary studies at Regent College in Canada. My very

first class was taught by John Stott, one of the world's best Bible teachers. He had come to Regent to do a summer intensive course on the book of Ephesians. I was thrilled by Ephesians and its emphasis on the church as one body. When one suffers we all suffer; when one rejoices, we all rejoice. I knew it was true. I was attracted to that way of living my life.

But as the year progressed, something disturbed me. I began to meet once a week for prayer with a fellow student named Jack. Now Jack was extremely disciplined. I would be working on papers up to the last day. He was always done a week or two before the due date. My work was good. His was excellent. He came up with profound observations that enriched the life of our classes. I wanted to be genuinely happy for Jack and his success as a student. I loved the teaching I had received that summer in Ephesians about being one body and rejoicing with those who rejoiced. But I could not rejoice in Jack's discipline and excellent work without a twinge of envy.

Fast forward fifteen years, to the early 1990s. By then I had been a Christian for twenty-five years, and I was serving as a missionary in Venezuela. I worked hard at being able to communicate in Spanish. Mike, who served with another mission, was gifted in languages. Hearing his nearly perfect accent and his use even of the current slang, it was hard to believe that he was not a native Spanish speaker. Instead of rejoicing in his God-given ability, I felt a secret satisfaction on those few occasions when I heard him make a mistake.

Now come with me to one of the annual Honolulu conferences sponsored by Hawaiian Island Ministries. I am interested in how people grow spiritually, how they and I can draw closer to Jesus. One year, I signed up for a seminar led by a pastor from California who had written a helpful book on the subject of spiritual growth. As he introduced himself to the group I realized that he was a bit younger than I. I felt a little tense. I have never written a book. Nobody flies me to the Mainland and pays to hear me speak. I am older than he is, but I have not accomplished as much. As he continued his self-introduction, he mentioned some of his struggles and weaknesses. I was secretly relieved. He wasn't so great after all.

Well, I am sure you have figured out by now what old wineskin I am talking about in my life. It is the desire to put me and my success at the center. The world is driven by a push to succeed, to edge out the other. My envy of the extra five cents an hour that my friend was earning, my mixed feelings about

the success of others in their studies and their ministry, it all makes perfect sense to the world. It is all evidence of the wineskin of self centeredness.

But you can see how the wineskin of beating out the competition, of looking out for Number One, will not hold the new wine of Jesus. He told us that the first will be last and the last will be first. To the extent that I hang on to my old wineskin, I will never be able to rejoice in the success of others. I will even subtly undercut them. When those thoughts of wanting to be Number One surface I need to acknowledge them for what they are—an old wineskin that cannot hold the transforming work of Jesus. I need to confess them, and reject them. I need to ask for a new wineskin that is more interested in US instead of so focused on ME.

Small groups, families, denominations, and congregations can have old wineskins that cannot hold the new wine of the kingdom of God. They are not necessarily wineskins from the world, like self-centeredness. They might be things that were good at one time, but that no longer fit our circumstances. The New Creation Initiative, or NCI, that our congregation has been experiencing is really an ongoing attempt to discover what old wineskins might be hindering the work that Jesus desires to do in and through Makiki Christian Church, and to replace them with new wineskins. The reason that NCI does not have an ending point is that new wineskins are always becoming old and needing to be replaced.

Let's take a look at the history of our own congregation for some examples. A hundred years ago, the largest immigrant group to Hawaii was the Japanese. It made perfect sense for Okumura-sensei to come here and to begin a Japanese language ministry. But as more Nisei became part of the congregation, English Sunday School and Bible study classes were needed as an adjunct ministry. The wineskin of Japanese-only did not fit the new circumstances. Later on English ministry became the larger one, so the English pastor became the senior pastor. For some time, the English and Japanese congregations functioned rather independently of each other. But the old wineskin of largely independent congregations does not fit our new reality. Family Camp, the Rainbow Connection, and the friendships among the youth of the two congregations all draw us together. How are we to relate to each other now? That is a new wineskin kind of question.

As you walk around our neighborhood, you do not hear much Japanese spoken. You are more likely to hear Micronesian languages. Will the day

come when an appropriate new wineskin for Makiki will include a congregation of Marshallese speakers?

Last week Pastor Wayne mentioned a myth or old wineskin that one commonly finds in congregations: the myth that Christian faith has mainly to do with believing certain things about Jesus. But that is not the case. The purpose of a small group, or a Bible class, or a youth group meeting, or a Sunday School class is not just to get people to know a lot about Jesus. The purpose is to form a congregation that lives a lot like Jesus. So we always need to look at curriculum, sermon content, youth ministry, camp, elderly care with the question in mind: are they in some way forming us into a congregation that thinks and acts like Jesus?

The way we handle conflicts, the way we greet strangers, the way we relate to our neighborhood and to our preschool, the way we relate to our denomination all need to reflect that we have been with Jesus, and that we, individually and as a congregation, are the sort of flexible wineskins that can receive the new wine of the kingdom.

Let us pray.