

19 February 2023

Stumbling Blocks: Rethinking Relevance “Old Wineskins”

Mark 2:18-28

Many in Jesus’ day were puzzled by this new teacher from Nazareth. He taught as one with authority, but he wasn’t a part of the Jewish establishment. He didn’t even follow their rules. We read today from Mark chapter 2, verses 18-22:

¹⁸Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ ¹⁹Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

²¹‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.’

The people wanted to know what was up with this Jesus. They knew what rabbis were supposed to look like and how they were supposed to act, and he didn’t fit their expectations. So they asked why he was different, and Jesus replied with a parable: “You don’t sew new cloth on an old garment, do you? If you do, the new cloth will shrink when it’s washed, rip its stitches, and make the hole worse. You don’t put new wine in old wineskins, do you? If you do, then as the wine ferments, the gas it produces will expand and burst the stiff skins. No, you need wineskins with some flexibility for new wine.”

What Jesus is saying is that he’s bringing a new kind of teaching. To use his wine analogy, he’s bringing new wine. Not *different* exactly; it’s from the same vine as the old stuff. Like the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus taught from the Hebrew scriptures. But where the scribes’ teaching stressed the parts about external purity and obeying the rules and observing temple rites, Jesus’ teaching stressed the parts about repentance and internal transformation, about justice and compassion for the poor and helpless and outcast, welcome to outsiders – even (Gasp!) Gentiles. And this teaching did not fit easily within the structures and rules that had developed around the old teachings. Those structures are the wineskins. He seems to be saying that his teaching would never play nicely with the established religion that they were used to. If you put his wine in the old wineskins, it would blow them to pieces from within.

And he was right. After Jesus’ resurrection, his disciples tried to fit into the established religion they knew. They went to the temple. They kept the rules. They appeared to be hoping that they could be a reform movement within Judaism, bringing the rest of their faith over to their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah and his approach to scriptures. It didn’t work. This new group, led by common people who hadn’t been to rabbinical school, including women in leadership and meeting wherever they wanted instead of the temple, was felt by religious leaders to be a challenge to their authority. When the followers of Christ began admitting Samaritans and even Greeks and Romans to their numbers, that was the last straw. The new teaching of Jesus may have come from the same scriptures, but it did not fit within the structure and hierarchy of 1st century Judaism. As a result, these so-called “Little Christs” or “Christians” had to break away and invent their own structures. Their new wine required new wineskins.

What the Christians ran up against is a universal Catch-22 with institutions. Sometimes institutions need to change, either because of internal problems or because the world has changed around them, but institutions have hierarchies (which, by the way, literally means “the ranking of priests”), and the only people with the power to change an institution are the people at the top of the hierarchy. But those are also the people who are least likely to *want* to change the institution, because the current structures are still working just fine for them.

We see this pattern again and again. Those Christians and their new wine grew rapidly in the Roman Empire, eventually themselves becoming the established religion, with their own structures and rules and hierarchies. By 1500 or so, the Roman Church hierarchy was as corrupt as you can imagine, and then a little more. So a devout Augustinian monk named Martin Luther set out to reform the church, bringing it back to the teachings of the New Testament. He didn’t intend to start a new church. He just wanted to reform the current one. Yeah, good luck, Marty. His new wine – salvation by faith, the priesthood of the believer, the teaching of scripture to common people in their own language – did not fit well, or at all, within the old wineskins. So, like the apostles before him, he had to start a new church, a new vessel for his new wine.

Notice one thing, though, in this pattern. Christianity did not *replace* Judaism, and Lutheranism did not *replace* the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, last time I checked, both are still around. But what these new movements did do was take over the narrative. They became the centers of change and growth – not only for themselves, but also for the old wineskins they had left. In many ways, it was the challenge of Christianity that forced the Jewish faith to rethink its own patterns. Similarly, the challenge of the Protestant Reformation forced the Roman Church to do its own, considerably more gradual, reformation.

One more historical example: our own John Wesley. He never intended to leave the Church of England, and, in fact, never did. He just wanted to revive it. He looked around at a church that had become a tame, innocuous social institution, a sort of religious service-provider, offering baptisms and weddings and funerals and other than that staying out of people’s lives, and John wanted to stir it to a renewed devotion to Christ. His new wine was a wine of total commitment and personal holiness and justice and service to others. But once again, his new wine wouldn’t fit in the old wineskins. Wesley didn’t get persecuted, like the early Christians, or excommunicated, like Luther, but his reforms fell just as flat in the church he had inherited. The hierarchy of the 18th century Anglican Church simply tut-tutted at this wild-eyed fanatic and turned their backs on him. Remember, the current structures were working just fine for them. So Wesley’s followers had to start from scratch, and what they ended up with was a lot like what the early Christians did: small groups, led primarily by lay people, with what few clergy there were serving as resource people instead of leaders. It was a flexible and adaptable new wineskin, and especially in the new nation called the United States of America, it took over the narrative. There’s a reason that it was Methodists, not Anglicans, who spread across our nation. We were working with new wineskins, stretching them out where necessary to meet the demands of a new world.

For the past month or so, I’ve been talking about stumbling blocks. There are a lot of reasons that people today are turned off by Christianity, and I’ve been trying to deal with some of those. I’ve mostly talked about theology: things that some Christians have taught that have become stumbling blocks, and I’ve tried to show that those teachings can be reimagined. Christians have said some absurd things, and we’re not bound to all of them. But today, I want to talk about a different stumbling block, one that is not about our teaching: it’s our institutions.

You see, we're there again. Our wineskins have grown stiff and inflexible. We have developed our structures and rules and hierarchies, and – as inevitably happens with institutions – as we've grown larger, we've devoted more and more of our time and resources to institutional maintenance. Worse, this has happened just at the time when a new generation has risen that is deeply suspicious of institutions in general. In the 1950s, coming off the shared national crises of the Great Depression and World War II, Americans were community-minded and actually trusted institutions. They joined churches in numbers not seen before or since, preferring churches that were part of large denominations. They joined civic clubs and fraternal orders. They trusted the government (mostly) and Walter Cronkite entirely, and when they went bowling, they bowled in leagues. Today, Americans are suspicious of churches, *especially* if they're part of large denominations, have mostly forgotten civic clubs, distrust the government, get their news from designer channels and websites that cater to their individual prejudices, and if they bowl at all, Americans bowl alone. It is not a promising context for an institutional church, because as we have seen, institutions don't adapt well to change.

Now with the other stumbling blocks I've talked about, I've had some suggestions on new ways to look at the problems. I don't have much for you on this one. The church didn't cause this new attitude, at least not by ourselves, and we can't fix it by ourselves. But I can offer hope. The reason I went through all those historical examples of times when institutions hardened was to show you that when that happened, there was always new wine coming and new wineskins to hold it. Let's pause for a moment and watch a two-minute video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvmDTVpOVTs&t=9s>

Yes, it's an Ikea commercial. No, we're not getting anything for product placement. But there's more here than just a reason to buy red chairs, isn't there? Did you notice how the old man's transformation began? When he was forced out of his rut, when there wasn't a place for him on the old bench. But as soon as he was forced to sit somewhere else, he began to see other possibilities. He could feed different birds, in different places. Over by the pond. Or in Africa. And that there was more to life than feeding birds. And as he stretched, he grew younger.

I don't know what the new wine for Christ's church in America is going to look like. My bet is that it will no longer involve large denominational structures, and there will probably be fewer people doing what I'm doing today: standing up in front of a congregation pretending to be an authority. I'm not suggesting that denominations or traditional churches like this one will disappear entirely. Judaism, Catholicism, and Anglicanism didn't, after all. But I am saying that new ideas are coming, and we get to choose whether we listen to them, or sit on the bench.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for your church. We are an imperfect incarnation of you, to be sure. As individuals, we share the weaknesses of humanity, and as a group we share the weaknesses of human institutions. But your stubbornly patient love always finds a way to shine through all our obstacles, across every stumbling block, and in this place we have met you. Thank you. Amen.