

Mixing New Wine with Old Wineskins

(Or: "Blessed are the Flexible")

Mark 2:13-22
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
June 14, 2009

Today we're going to start with an historical science pop-quiz. Who was **Copernicus**? Do you remember his contribution to science?

Copernicus was born in Poland in 1473 (536 years ago), educated in Italy, and worked in Germany. In 1530, Copernicus completed and gave to the world his great work *De Revolutionibus*, The Book of Revolutions (not Revelations but Revolutions).

Copernicus asserted that the earth was not only round, but rotated on its axis once a day, and traveled around the sun once a year. This was not only a fantastically new concept, but a fanatical one for the times. Up to the time of Copernicus the great scientific thinkers of the western world believed in the theory that the universe was a closed space bounded by a spherical envelope beyond which there was nothing. The scientific community at that time, which was *still* arguing over whether or not the earth was flat, was now being told that the earth wasn't a fixed, inert, immovable mass, located at the center of the universe, with all celestial bodies, including the sun and the fixed stars, revolving around it.

Copernicus' work in the field of astronomy, a full century *before* the work of Galileo (who actually proved all of Copernicus' theories), shook not only the scientific world to its very core, but especially the religious world. Beyond its scientific implications, many believe that perhaps the greatest impact of this discovery was on the **human ego**.

Why? Because, **if the earth wasn't the center of the universe, then maybe humankind wasn't either. In other words, maybe everything doesn't revolve around us.** (That's still hard for some to believe.) We have no concept how radical that new idea was to that society, and especially to the Christian Church.

The Church acted quickly to declare such teaching heretical. They placed Copernicus' book on a list called the *Index*, which were books forbidden to be read by Catholics - kind of a "Banned in Boston" kind of thing. Church leaders charged that Copernicus was "a fool who wishes to reverse the entire scheme of astronomy as taught by the scripture."

But before we criticize the lack of forethought of the Roman Catholic Church in medieval and later times, let's look at what the Protestant Reformers

had to say about this issue. As it turns out they were just as rigid. Martin Luther declared, "This upstart astronomer deceives the people and reverses the teaching of the Bible. Sacred scripture tells us that Joshua made the sun stand still not the earth." And our own John Calvin, father of the Reformed Tradition to which we Presbyterians trace our roots, answered Copernicus by quoting Psalm 93, "God has established the world, it shall never be moved." Talk about a literal interpretation.

I find it absolutely shocking that so many religious folks in the 21st century still try to argue that the Bible is a science book. I was taught a much different approach to the Bible in seminary: **The Bible is not a book of science, but a book of faith; written not by scientists, but by people of faith.**

Copernicus, like **Galileo**, **Darwin**, and so many other scientists, presented a radical opposition to conventional thought and traditional biblical interpretation. So how did the Church respond? Like it always does when the status quo is challenged and threatened, when new ideas are too big to fit within the small box of its own understanding. It responded with swift and harsh condemnation! **Within the past 200 years we have witnessed many in the church continue whole-heartedly their condemning ways toward new scientific ideas, new theological perspectives, and new ways of ordering society** – condemning even those who have been advocates for equality among all people: racial equality, gender equality, and now sexual orientation equality.

As progressive Christians we are also tempted, however, to fall into the trap of thinking that because we have accepted many *new* ideas about science, the Bible, and the role of the church, that we would never be so narrow minded. But it's not just about open-mindedness, it's also about the ability to accept change in any form. Regardless of how progressive we may consider ourselves, do we not also still fall into certain routines of behavior and thought?

Human nature tends toward believing that after we do something or think something the same way for a certain period of time, it becomes sacred to us. Yes, even we can confuse what has become routine with the attitude that it is the "right" way to act or think or believe.

It really is true: people do not particularly like change. But if we have learned anything from Darwin's theory of evolution it's this: **Nothing ever stays the same.** So at the very least, change may indeed be one of those "laws of the universe". Or, as people of faith, perhaps it may even be appropriate to suggest that it's a "God thing" when things change.

Regardless, I think it's safe to say that God certainly shook things up a lot through the teaching and ministry of a man named Jesus. **Jesus had a habit of breaking with tradition and routine.** He had the nerve to hang around with the kind of people that good religious folks just weren't supposed to mix with. Jesus and his followers even had the gall to put on public displays of joy and celebration, when others, like the Pharisees (and even the disciples of John the Baptist) solemnly fasted – restraining from food and frivolity. It reminds me of an

old definition of a Puritan: A **Puritan** is a person who desperately fears that someone, somewhere, is having fun.

In today's Scripture passage from the gospel of Mark, Jesus uses the occasion to warn his disciples about the problems created by an inflexible and closed mind – a mind that refuses to even consider (let alone learn and accept) new things. He warns them that an old small box will not readily hold new big ideas. Jesus could have come up with a new beatitude, such as: **“Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not tear or be broken.”**

Instead, Jesus used a couple of common, ordinary images, as was his style, to get his message across. Jesus stated, “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment.” Why? What happens to unshrunk cloth when it gets wet? It shrinks, of course. Remember buying blue jeans in the days before preshrunk cotton? You had to make sure they fit like a sack so that after you washed them for the first time you could still button them, and so that they wouldn't come half way up your leg (we called those “high water pants”).

Likewise, if an unshrunk patch of cloth is sewn onto an already shrunk piece of clothing, it will tear the garment when it becomes wet. The lesson: **New patches on old garments are incompatible. This analogy, most likely, was used by the early church to apply to how new forms of religious practice and new theological ways of understanding God caused conflict with those that held to the old ways of thinking and doing.**

Mark also writes that Jesus used another proverb-like saying, “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins” (v. 22). In Jesus' day, wine was kept in wineskins, which was a pouch made out of animal hides. There was no such thing as a wine bottle in our modern sense of the term. When these skins were new they had a certain elasticity and flexibility. As they grew old they became stiff and unyielding. New wine continues to ferment. It gives off gases, and these gases expand and cause pressure. If the wineskin is new, it is elastic enough to take the pressure. But if it is old, therefore rigid and inflexible, it will burst. Both the wine and the wineskin will be ruined.

Jesus was trying to teach the staunch, legalistic religious authorities of his day that he and his teachings were like that new patch of cloth and that new wine. Conflict with the ‘establishment’, with those that held firmly to tradition and to the ways that things were always done and believed, was therefore inevitable.

What Jesus teaches his disciples is the necessity of being flexible, willing to change, willing to stretch, willing to be open-minded, willing to reform old ways of thinking and doing.

To say that this is just as true for us today is to state the obvious. **There needs to be a willingness within the church to bend and stretch to meet its current needs, the needs of the community and an ever-changing culture.** That is part of the very definition of being progressive. Notice, however, that this doesn't mean that we must become like the culture, but rather to be flexible

enough in order to meet the needs of the community in which we are to serve. **Otherwise, we become irrelevant.** And this, according to many experts, is what seems to be happening within all the mainline denominations in the 21st century.

That's why over the past decade there has been an explosion of new thinking often put under the heading of the emerging church, or missional church movements, of which our own **Acts 16:5 Initiative** is a part.

Undoubtedly, Jesus' teaching about the incompatibility of old and new shows a bias toward the new. But did he mean we are to reject the old in place of the new? No, I don't think that was what Jesus was teaching. As one biblical commentator observes, "the text's paradoxical counterthrust about preserving the old garment warns against the easy assumption that everything old must be bad and anything new must be good."

It is important to notice that in these verses Jesus (and the gospel writer, Mark) is not attacking the old. The point, rather, is that **God doesn't want us to hold too rigidly to the past, or to be too resistant to the new work of God's Spirit in our lives.**

So how can we apply this teaching to our own lives? Perhaps it begins by asking if there are there any habits, traditions, or beliefs that you or I are holding onto so tightly that we are putting up resistance to the work of God's Spirit in our lives?

We, as a congregation, can apply all of this to College Hill as well. Are we being open and flexible enough to deal with all the newness that God has brought (and is bringing) to this congregation?

The metaphor of new wine, and the wineskin that holds it, is poignant for the life and ministry of any congregation, including this one. In fact, it has always been an appropriate metaphor for this church. **There's no doubt that College Hill is still a vibrant and relevant congregation because you and your predecessors have been flexible enough to say "Yes" to what you and your former pastors have believed God was calling you to do and be.**

Yet, since change is always accompanied with resistance, the question remains, will we continue to be flexible enough? I think we will. But if not, according to Jesus' teaching, both the new and the old will be damaged. And nobody wants that.

So perhaps the beatitude so appropriate for College Hill continues to be: "Blessed are the flexible, for they are pliable in the hands of God."

Amen.