

**New Wine and New Wineskins**  
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church  
August 27, 2023 PM Sermon  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Mark 2:18-22

“Jesus, how is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but your disciples aren’t?” It’s not surprising that people should ask this question of Jesus. They had an idea of what a very religious person was supposed to look like and Jesus didn’t fit that. Sure he talked a lot about God, and he referred to the Bible, but the similarity stopped there. To them a religious person should be a little less fun-loving. A religious person was like the Pharisees who followed strict rules about praying many hours every day, studying the Bible, fasting for long periods of time, observing the Sabbath with rigorous precision. A religious person was someone like John the Baptist. A guy who wore camel skin and lived in the desert. A man who, when he wasn’t fasting, ate locusts and wild honey. A man who called you to repent and talked about the fires of judgment and the axe at the root of the tree.

In other words, their impression of a serious religious person was quite a bit like the popular impression of serious religious people today. Think of the picture you get of pastors in popular media. A lot of the time it’s someone stiff, someone a little out of touch, someone whose nervous about having too much fun. Think of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. This insufferable man, who is prim and obsequious, always concerned with appearances, always wanting to look proper. Or if you want lower culture, think of Father Mulcahey on *MASH*, a good guy, but out of touch. Or think of the church lady, Dana Carvey’s character on *Saturday Night Live* in the 90’s. Looking over her glasses, ready to jump on anyone she thought was out of order. In the popular imagination, religious people are austere, serious and a little out of touch.

I’ve definitely seen this popular perception at work in my own life. Most ministers I know have had the experience where we are living our life, doing something normal where we’re having fun and laughing, and then someone finds out what we do for a living and they say, “You’re a minister...you sure don’t seem like a minister!!” They never say that when you’re being serious; they say it when your letting your hair down and having fun.

To the people, Jesus didn’t seem like a minister. He wasn’t like John the Baptist; he wasn’t like the Pharisees. He didn’t fast much, he wasn’t serious, and he had a little too much fun at dinner parties. Given all this you can’t blame them for asking, “Hey Jesus, what’s going on?”

Let’s listen carefully to Jesus’ answer to them. Because I think it has some important lessons to teach us about what it means to be religious, what a religious person looks like, in the kingdom of God. Jesus answers their question in typical fashion, not with a direct answer, but with three analogies. You can’t expect the people at a wedding to fast while the bridegroom is around. Soon enough the wedding will be over, the bridegroom will be gone, and then you can fast. You don’t sow a patch of unshrunk cloth onto an old shrunken garment because the new will tear out the old. You can’t put new wine into old wineskins because new wine will burst out of the old wineskins. You need new wineskins for the new wine. Now all this isn’t immediately clear. Jesus’ habit of using parables and analogies always leaves you scratching your head at first, but I think that he is saying a couple of things about life in the kingdom.

First he is teaching us that his coming brings a new Spirit to God’s people. With his coming he announces that the Kingdom of God is here, and in that Kingdom he is serving a new kind of wine. If popular wisdom, sustained by people like the Pharisees, saw religion as a somber and severe affair. Jesus says, “No, it’s more like a wedding party. When I announce the Kingdom of God to you I’m announcing a wedding feast.”

Wedding parties in that culture were much more involved than in our world. Listen to the description of scholar Dale Bruner: At a wedding feast, “One was with best friends at a wedding party that lasted 7 days, with the finest food, drink and fun available.” A wedding party was the opposite of a dour, serious affair. It was a celebration! If you came to a wedding party and refused to participate in the fun, it would be a serious insult to the host. Here’s Bruner again: “For one of the inner-circle friends at the party to have fasted this week would have been a capital insult to the host, and depressing for everyone else.” So, a wedding feast wasn’t a grim, sanctimonious gathering, it was a place of joy.

And Jesus wasn't just announcing any wedding party; he was announcing the messianic wedding feast. He's calling himself the bridegroom and when he does that he is saying that he is the Messiah. Specifically, he's the fulfillment of passages like Hosea 2:19 where God announces that in the day of Israel's deliverance, "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in justice and righteousness, in love and compassion." Or Isaiah 62 where the prophet says, "In those days, the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man married a young woman, so will your builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you!" In essence Jesus says to the Pharisees, 'Lighten up boys, the bridegroom has arrived! The messiah is here! Put on a funny hat and join the party!

This sense of a party, a wedding, a joyful celebration at the heart of the kingdom Jesus announces is something that you see in other New Testament places. What was the first miracle of Jesus in the gospel of John? It was when he turned water into wine at the wedding of Cana. Jesus saved a party. He announced the messianic party with wine flowing from the hills in fulfillment of Amos 9:11-15. In the parable of Luke 14, how did Jesus characterize the Kingdom? Like a wedding party. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, what did the Father do when the son returned home? He threw a party. In Revelation 19, how does John see the gathering of the saints in glory? He sees it as a wedding party. Put it all together, and what is the theological point here? That as people who belong to the bridegroom we are fundamentally people of joy. We are not dour, sour, fearful and fretful. We are people of joy. Jesus came for our joy.

Christian Reformed people forget this as easily as anyone. Carl Tuyl was a Dutch Canadian pastor who was a great preacher and story teller, tells this story from one of the first synods he attended many years ago here in Grand Rapids. Back then synod was two weeks, and it was a gathering on the weekend in between the weekly sessions. On that weekend the delegates were invited to come out to Holland for a big synodical dinner, paid for by a wealthy CRC member. They were driven out there in cars and arrived to a beautiful restaurant: tables neatly spread with white linen, fine crystal, and good silver. The waiters were all dressed up with white shirts and black bowties. It looked like it was going to be great dinner. Tuyl sat down at his table. His waiter filled his glass with a good red wine and plopped a thick, juicy steak in front of him. In fact, everyone got a steak and the wonderful smell of flame broiled sirloin filled the room. Tuyl says his mouth started watering and he was ready to dig in, but before he could start someone had to stand up and offer the prayer.

Some very serious, very earnest minister was chosen for the task and he stood up to pray. And he prayed and he prayed and he prayed. He prayed for all the crises of the world, he prayed for all the items on the synod's agenda, he prayed for all then missionaries and the lost souls of the world, he prayed for all the poor starving people of the world who would never get to eat in a place like this and who could never dream of eating such a steak, trapped as they were in their wretched poverty. By the time the prayer was done, the steaks were cold, and even if they had been warm, the joy of eating them had left the room, replaced by a cold cloud of guilt. Sometimes it's as if we're afraid to have a good time. But Jesus isn't afraid. "The bridegroom is here, let the celebration begin! I've brought new wine and it's time for us to enjoy ourselves."

Now, of course, all this needs to be nuanced. Certainly life isn't all fun and games. Heaven knows there are terrible, terrible things in this world. There is plenty of sin and there is plenty of misery. So long as there is sin, so long as there are powers who set themselves against the king and his kingdom, so long as our old sinful self still pulls at us and tempts us, we must be serious in our fight against these things. It's not all a party; we must run with perseverance the race marked out for us. We must pick up our cross and follow Jesus.

But even then, joy is at the center!!! Remember Hebrews 12? What was the motivation at the heart of Jesus' picking up his cross? What was in Jesus' heart that made him endure the cross and its pain? "Set your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame." For the joy set before him. The joy of the bridegroom, his love for the beloved, his love for us caused him to pick up his cross. Joy is at the center of this thing, not fear, or anger, or righteous zeal. Joy. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who finds a treasure hidden in a field, when he found it ... in his joy he went and sold everything he had and bought the field." Jesus said that (Matthew 13:44). "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Paul said that (Romans 14:17).

That brings us to the second part of what Jesus is saying in this passage. I explained the new wine, the new wine is the Joy of the new covenant inaugurated in the coming of Jesus. But Jesus also says, "No one pours

new wine into old wineskins. If he does he will burst the wineskins and both the wine and the skins will be ruined. No, you pour new wine into new wineskins.” What’s that all about? When Jesus says that the new wine needs new wineskins, he’s saying that the new wine of the kingdom will be expressed in new forms. The old wineskins were the Old Testament law with all its ceremonies and its purity; laws about touching and tasting. Those were good laws for the time before the bridegroom came, for the time before the Holy Spirit was sent upon the church. Now that the new wine is here, it will burst those old wineskins.

Many of the old ceremonies and sacrifices and practices don’t fit anymore, they’re not appropriate. For example, we used to use the old wineskins of animal sacrifices in our faith; but now that the bridegroom has made himself a sacrifice and given us the new wine of his blood, we don’t need to do that anymore. The old wineskin of circumcision has been burst and replaced by baptism; a celebration that isn’t just for males, a celebration that bursts the bounds of ethnic Israel. The old wineskins kept Gentiles at the edge of the temple; with the new wineskins there is no Greek nor Jew, neither male nor female for all are one in Christ Jesus. The old wineskins forbade us from touching and eating unclean things, but now that the bridegroom has come, those things can’t contaminate us anymore; instead we contaminate them with his goodness, with his righteousness, with his joy.

There is a lot of handwringing in the modern church about all sorts of things. And heaven knows there are things to worry about, but I wonder if all this worry and the commentary and the punditry around it is obscuring our joy. When the world looks at us, do they see joy and hope, or do they see fear and worry. And if they don’t see joy, why would they ever want to join us? We all know there is darkness in the world, but there is so much light, so many things to live for. The Lord has spread a table for us in the presence of our enemies and he has filled our cup till it overflows with joy.

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