

“The Parables of Jesus—Old or New Wineskins?”

A couple of months of ago we upgraded our software here at the church. The Microsoft programs we use all the time needed to be updated because they were no longer supporting the versions we had. I'm talking about Microsoft Word and Publisher, Excel. We get the disks, load up Word and Publisher, the two I use, and they look completely different. Different interface, different layout, different buttons, different colors, different icons. The stuff I used to know where it was on what drop-down menu, for formatting and fonts and highlighting and backgrounds—all different. I hated it! I couldn't find anything. If you've updated you know what I'm talking about.

Word and Publisher in the good old days, I knew, I understood, I liked it that way. Microsoft was saying that it the new layout was simpler, more intuitive, easier to use, more customizable, easier to see. I understood all that with my head, but they're changing something I interact with almost every day of my life. It had been good enough for the last 8 or 9 years, and I was sure it would be good enough for my children, and grand children, just the way it was.

I tried to use it a few times and it was frustrating and I just wanted to reinstall the old versions. I was about to send an email to Microsoft telling them my discontent and why did they have to change something that worked perfectly well.

But I didn't want to mess with uninstalling the new stuff and reinstalling the old stuff, so I just started to use the new programs and I grumbled every time I had to sit there and use it. After a couple of weeks I started to really see the new changes, and I started to customize things a little and after a couple more weeks I found myself starting the programs up and saying to myself, “You know what, I like the new format of this program. This new layout is simpler, more intuitive, easier to use, more customizable, easier to see. I kind of like the new colors.”

Here's the thing, if Jesus were telling the parable of the wineskins today, he might be telling us the parable of Microsoft Word. Because the wineskins parable is about how we deal with change. That's the focus of this parable. We struggle with change as human beings. We like things to stay the same. I'm a little contradictory on this. When I talk to other pastors, when I've spoken to other groups, I tell them that they have to embrace change. I tell other pastors and church leaders that if their church doesn't embrace change that it's going to die. Because the world is changing all around us and we have to embrace change. I tell you all the time that our message doesn't change but our method must always change.

There's part of me that loves change, but I've realized something over the years. When staff members or lay leaders here at the church started to change things, we'd talk and I found myself saying, “We've never done it that way before.” Maybe they wanted to start a new ministry or change something that's been around awhile. I was like, “Why do you have to change things?” It's been good enough for 5 or 10 years, why do you have to go messing around with things now?”

Here's the realization: I really love change, as long as I'm the one initiating it! But if somebody else initiates change, I don't like it very much. And the older I get, the less I like change, the more I like things to stay the same, whether that's where stuff is in Target, or the flavor of my toothpaste, or the music on my radio stations, or the menu at my favorite restaurants. I'm guessing that's true of a lot of us here today. And that takes us to this parable of the wineskins. Let's dig into this parable today and understand what Jesus was saying to the people of his day and what it means to us today.

In order to get at that we have to look at the context of this parable. Like pastor Mark has said, to fully understand the parables that Jesus used it's important to look at what was happening before Jesus told the parable. Parables are analogies, they're stories from everyday life that help to explain spiritual or theological truths. Jesus would take something from ordinary life and use it to illustrate something spiritual, or profound, or deep. And it's very helpful to look at what Jesus meant in a parable by looking at what happens just before Jesus tells the parable.

When we back up a little bit to chapter 4, Jesus is preaching his very first sermon in Nazareth, his home town. I remember the first time I preached in my home church. I had just turned 16 and I wanted it to be good. I worked and worked and worked on my message. I wanted people to like it. And I was hoping after I

preached it that people would come up to me afterward and high five me and say, "That was really good Aaron, great job!" But after Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue the people chased him out of town and try to throw him off a cliff! Not the kind of homerun sermon he was hoping for! But this is what happened. He unsettled the people in his hometown by what he said. He challenged them and made them think that maybe God's good news was open to all people, not just the Jews. That was very unsettling to them.

After that in chapter 4 and into chapter 5 we see a whole series of things that Jesus does that are unsettling. At the end of Luke chapter 4 Jesus heals people on the Sabbath. He broke the rules. No work was to be done on the Sabbath, healing was work, and Jesus as a Rabbi, knew it, and he did it anyway. Very unsettling to the religious leaders.

Then chapter 5 begins with Jesus calling his first disciples. The way rabbis chose disciples was by going to the local seminary and picking the best and brightest students. They could read and write and had a tremendous depth of training and education. But Jesus finds some people fishing in the lake. People who had been cut from their education long ago because they were not the best and the brightest. He says, "Come and follow me and I'll make you fishers of people." It was very irregular and unsettling.

In Luke 5:12 Jesus comes across a man who has leprosy. A skin disease that was terrible and contagious. It looked bad and smelled bad and if you got it you were forced out of the village. Lepers had to yell out "Unclean, unclean!" The law said that you were not supposed to touch a leper and if you did you were unclean. But a leper came up to Jesus and said, "Could you please heal me?" It says that Jesus reached out and touched the man, and healed him. "You're not supposed to do that Jesus!"

Then in Luke 5:17 Jesus starts having even more serious conflict with the Pharisees, the religious leaders. Keep in mind that this is just one chapter into Jesus' ministry and he's already having problems with the religious leaders. Jesus is teaching and a crowd is listening, including some of the Pharisees. Some people bring their sick friend to Jesus. This guy is paralyzed and on a stretcher. This man's friends bring him to Jesus and Jesus looks at the man, and doesn't just heal him, he says, "Your sins are forgiven." And then he healed him. The Pharisees were outraged by that. They said, "Who is this who thinks he can forgive sins?! Only God can forgive sins!"

In verse 27 Jesus had moved on to another place and he finds a notorious tax collector (tax collectors were lumped together with the worst sinners out there). His name was Levi, or Matthew. Jesus says, "Levi, come and follow me, I want you to be my disciple." Levi throws a big dinner party for Jesus that night and who are the guests? A whole bunch of other people labeled as sinners that Matthew wants to meet Jesus. This is unsettling to the Pharisees because the Pharisees believed that in order to be pious, or righteous, or Godly, you had to stay as far away from sinners as possible. The word Pharisee means to be separate from. They were to be separated from sinners. So here is Jesus who is a rabbi, a teacher of the law, but he's not acting like a typical rabbi, he's eating with sinners! They ask him, "Why do you eat with people like that." It just wasn't done. Lots of people thought that Jesus wasn't living the way they thought pious and holy people should live.

That's the backdrop for this parable. The religious people of that day were looking at Jesus and their concepts of God, their interpretation of the scriptures, and their way of practicing their faith had a hard time accommodating Jesus' teaching about God and who was in and who was out. And all these people liked it better the old way.

Let's read it one more time. **"No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good'" (Luke 5:37-39, NRSV)**

We've looked at the context of this passage in scripture, but we also need to look at it in the context of the culture of that time. You see, at that time almost everybody grew grapes in their back yards and almost everybody made their own wine. Wine and winemaking were a regular part of life and people understood what Jesus was talking about. In the fall the people would harvest their grapes and crush them for the juice in a big winepress. They were carved into the stone, the grapes were put in here and then men, women and children would get in and stomp the grapes (after they'd washed their feet of course!). The juice from the grapes would

flow into the lower part, the vat. They would cover that juice and leave it in the vat for a week and the yeast that was naturally on the outside of the grapes would start to ferment the juice.

When yeast starts to break down the sugars in the grape juice two things are produced, alcohol and carbon dioxide gas. After a week that partially fermented juice was put into wineskins, not bottles like we think of today, but leather bags. They'd fill these leather bags with the juice, called new wine, and stitch them up tight, put them aside and let the fermentation continue. And as the juice continued to ferment that leather bag would stretch and stretch like a big leather balloon as the CO₂ was produced. And after a few months, the juice was done fermenting and had become wine and was used.

The question is, what do you do with the old wineskin? It would be tempting to fill it up again with partially fermented juice and use it again, but the people knew that was not possible because you could only use the wineskin once to ferment wine. After that it was already stretched out and if you filled it again it wouldn't stretch, it has lost its elasticity, it would burst and you would lose all the juice.

Everybody knew from experience don't put new wine into old wineskins or you'll lose both the wineskin and the wine. Everybody would have understood the metaphor that Jesus was using. But the question is, what did it mean then, and what does it mean to us today? Jesus saw how the Pharisees questioned everything he was doing, he saw how they couldn't understand why he would eat with people who were sinners and tax collectors, how he could offer forgiveness for sin, how he could practice spirituality in a different way. He was saying, "There are a lot of old wineskins around. Our forms of religion, our theology, even our biblical interpretation, must be flexible to allow God to do what God is going to do. We cannot be stuck in the past, we have to allow our theology, our thinking, our understanding, our community to be pliable enough, flexible enough, to allow God to do something new."

In Jesus' life, the wineskin of Judaism could never accommodate what Jesus was teaching and doing. At the end of Jesus' life, after he'd preached the gospel for three years, they crucified him, and his blood spilled to the ground like wine that had burst from an old wineskin. He was put to death because they could not accept what he teaching.

When Luke was writing this down, about 30 years after the crucifixion, Christians were being kicked out of the synagogues they had called home all their lives because the old wineskins could not stretch to accommodate the teachings of Jesus.

Let's apply this to our own lives, our own situations. What happens to Christians is that over time we get so used to things being the way they are, that we can no longer accommodate new ways. We say, "We've never done it that way before." Someone once said that those are the seven last words of a dying church. We get use to the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the arrangement on the stage, the décor, the way messages are presented, the way people dress. You get used to sitting in the same seats! I've been in churches that have pews and in the pews are little pillows that people keep there to mark their place. I hear horror stories of visitors coming into a church and sitting down and having a church member come up to them and say, "Sorry you've got to move, you're sitting in my seat."

We get used to sitting in the same places; we like things to be the same; we feel unsettled when they're different. But think about our children. Do you think that 15 years from now they'll want to sing the same kind of songs we're singing today? Do you think the same kind of music is going to speak to them? Do you think what people wear is going to be the same in 15 years as what it is today? Or the way of communicating the Gospel? So here's one of the questions for us: Are we going to be willing to change and adapt so that we can offer the gospel in a way that our kids can hear it and receive it, or are we going to say, "We've never done it that way before and you kids are going to have to look for a different church." These are your children and my children. These are the kinds of questions churches have to wrestle with.

I have to say that for the most part I'm proud of Saint Paul's and the way it has been willing to accommodate new thinking, new ministries, new ideas. I'm proud that people don't have to have to think a certain way, or dress a certain way, or look a certain way to call this their church home. I'm proud of the way this church has been willing to change and be flexible in how we live out our mission, how we worship, how we welcome people, but we have to be careful, that we don't fall into the trap of inflexibility.

Some of you are thinking right now, “OK Aaron what are you getting ready to do? What are you introducing?” Nothing, really! I’m just saying that I’m pretty sure that if we do worship exactly the same way in 15 years, those of you who are above a certain age won’t be with us anymore, and those who are below a certain age won’t be with us any more, we’ll be dying, and we’ll have lost our purpose. How pliable are your wineskins?

Of course this applies to a lot more than just styles of worship and it applies to the way we interpret the Bible. Here’s an example from the 16th century. That’s when science and religion were starting to have their first major conflicts. Galileo, through scientific observation, had come to believe that the earth rotated around the sun. That was a contradiction to what the church taught which was that the earth was the center of the universe and that everything revolved around the earth—they drew this from the Bible. That was the theological stance at the time. So when Galileo said, “No, the earth rotates around the sun,” that shook everything up. People were unsettled by that and he was brought before the Catholic Church on charges of heresy and was forced to recant publicly. It took 100 more years for the church to have wineskins pliable enough to say, “Galileo was right. The Earth goes around the sun and that doesn’t make it any less amazing in its creation.”

The Bible was used to justify slavery. Jefferson Davis said, “Slavery was established by decree of Almighty God. It is sanctioned in the Bible in both testaments from Genesis to Revelation. It has existed in all ages and has been found among the people of the highest civilization and in nations in the highest proficiency in the arts.” He was right. The Bible does sanction slavery. But that was the society in which the Biblical writers lived. They could not conceive of anything different than that. But later on we came to see that the principles that Jesus was teaching, even in his first sermon, that “I’ve come to proclaim release to the captives, to set people free,” we begin to look at that and say, “Wait a minute. Maybe Jesus was telling us that slavery was not what was meant to be. And when Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself that that meant all people, even slaves,’ and we’re not to own and mistreat other people. And finally the wineskins began to be pliable and we didn’t just use scripture to proof-text and justify the old ways, we were able to see the scriptures in a new way.

The same is true in our tradition regarding women becoming pastors and teachers. Yes, scripture says that a woman should keep silent in church, but when God began to do a new thing and gift and equip women for ministry that was hard thing for a lot of people, for some it still is. But this is another illustration of new wineskins. God doing a new thing, and our need to be pliable.

Let me wrap up this way. Last week Mark talked about the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son in essence says that he wishes his father was dead, he takes his inheritance and squanders it and yet when he hits rocks bottom, his father welcomes him home. Mark talked about how that’s a picture of the love God who welcomes us home when we’ve wandered away. The father didn’t punish the son for what he’d done, he was just so glad that his son had come home.

But in the parable there’s also an older son. Now sometimes we’re like the younger son who leaves God and makes terrible mistakes, but sometimes we’re like the older son. He represents people who have done the right thing all their lives, and been faithful. The older brother comes in from the fields and he sees that there’s a party going on in the house. He asks a servant what’s going on. The servant says, “Your younger brother has come home and your dad is so excited that he’s throwing this party!”

The older brother is ticked. He won’t even go inside to the party. The father comes out, he’s not angry with his older son. He begs him to come in. “Please come and join the party!” The older son says, “That son of yours squandered what you gave him on prostitutes and wild living and you throw a party for him. I’ve stayed and worked for you and never let you down and you’ve never thrown a party for me. That son of yours doesn’t deserve a party.”

The father looks at his older son and says, “You’ve got to remember that brother of yours was lost and now he’s found and that’s what matter most.”

The thing about Jesus is that he teaches us that God is fair and just on one hand, and loving and merciful on the other hand. Fairness and justice; love and mercy. God has both. But when God has to choose between fairness and justice, and love and mercy, love and mercy always win out with God. And

sometimes we can be unsettled about that because God seems to go around welcoming people we're unsettled by. And he's asking us to reach out to people we're not really comfortable with. But here's the thing, we need to be very, very grateful that love and mercy win out over fairness and justice. Because if we all got what we deserved, we wouldn't stand a chance.

Jesus challenges us to be open to the new ways of God. Open to reading the scriptures in new ways. Open to what science has to teach us. Not believing that science is the new religion, but being willing to hear what science has to say. We have to look around and practice the spirit of Jesus as we see other people. And we have to ask ourselves: Who are the Pharisees today who can't handle what Jesus wants to do and who keep people out instead of welcoming them in? Who are today's sinners and tax collectors that we feel uncomfortable being around, but that God wants to reach out to and welcome home like the younger son.

And finally, how are our wineskins? Old and brittle or pliable and open to what God wants to do. My hope and constant prayer for Saint Paul's is that our wineskins will always be new. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Sr. Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources for this message.