

Our Fermenting Faith

[Text - Mark 2:14-22]

Pastor Dave Shackle
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One of the things I find befuddling about Jesus' religious contemporaries, is that they are so befuddled by the company that Jesus keeps. Time-after-time they ask, "Why does this man break bread and run-around with *sinners*?" Really? Who else *is* there with whom he can associate, except us fallible and peculiar people? Of course, those religious leaders might say, "Hey, there's *us*! The *good* guys! The *righteous* ones! The people who know exactly who the Holy One welcomes, or rejects; loves and values, or disdains and dismisses!"

In Jesus' day, not unlike our own, many religious leaders had become quite rigid in defining who and what was acceptable, or unacceptable, to the Holy One. They were so focused on preserving their religious rituals, that they lost sight of the Divine Vision: that we treat all the people around us with compassion, kindness, and grace - the very *heart* of the Hebrew faith. So when Jesus arrives on the scene to lift the heavy burden of that oppressive religious yoke, and to welcome the religious outcasts, the religious authorities take him to task:

"Why don't your disciples fast, like we do?"

Why are do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners, which we don't do?"

"Why are you challenging and changing the way we've done things for centuries?"

Jesus responds, with a simple, yet spectacular allegory. "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. One puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

Apparently, when wine is new, it's still undergoing the active process of fermentation. This means that there's a lively chemical reaction taking place, as the sugar is being converted into alcohol and carbon dioxide; which causes the liquid to effervesce and expand. So, while a fresh and pliable wineskin can respond to such an expansion, an old and stiff wineskin cannot. Over time, it has taken-on a fixed and hardened shape which is no longer flexible; therefore the lively expanding of the new wine will stress it beyond its ability to give. And so it breaks, causing both the wine and the wineskin to be lost.

"One puts new wine into *fresh* wineskins" Jesus says. And Jesus puts into practice a fresh and flexible, effervescent and expansive new way of living-out ones faith. A way which honors the positive, Life-affirming

practices of the past; yet willingly lets-go of anything that is divisive or damaging to the Family of Faith, or to the Human Family.

In this morning's Continuing Testament, Brian McClaren points-out the pattern - found throughout the Scriptures - of allowing and encouraging people's faith practices to "expand, evolve and grow." One way to do this, is by recognizing that the Living, Active, Creating Holy One cannot be contained within the Scriptures. That's why we *have* a *Continuing* Testament! That's why we remind ourselves that "God is still speaking!" That's why we honor and adore Jesus Christ - the Incarnate Word who passionately lives-out that Divine Call, to treat the people around us with compassion, kindness, and grace.

The reason John and I chose today's readings and theme, is because both of our congregations have now hit the 200-year anniversary of their founding. This came to pass, in large part, because - throughout the years - members of both Faith Communities were willing to expand, evolve and grow; to let-go of those traditions or practices which were no longer helpful or meaningful, in order to take-hold of new ideas and fresh ways of doing things. As John and I were discussing this, it struck me that this year, three of our members turned 99 years old! Bill Toneff, Jeanne Cowden, and Betty Gifford are 99, yet each of them remains active and open-minded, compassionate and caring, willing to share the wisdom of their years, while still eager to learn about and support the new ministries and pathways to which the Holy One is leading us.

People often think that the older one gets, the more rigid and inflexible he or she becomes. And while that may be true *physically* [as I myself am beginning to experience] it need not be so in terms of one's thinking, open-mindedness, willingness to learn, and certainly not one's faith.

Jesus says, "No one puts new wine into old wineskin," Similarly, no one can put new ideas into hardened or closed mind-sets. No one can get new results by tightly clinging to old practices and behaviors. Fortunately, as our many longtime faithful members have shown us, following the way of Jesus Christ will always lead us to new beginnings, new challenges, and - most importantly - new and lasting life!