

“New Wine”
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Mark 2:21-22

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. 22 And 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.'

About an hour outside of St. Louis, located in the hills along the Missouri River, there is a cluster of wineries located near Augusta, Missouri. Montelle, a winery opened in 1970 is located on a bluff that overlooks the river. It is surrounded by vineyards, has beautiful views, and offers wine tasting and meals that can be enjoyed on their scenic patio. All of their wine is made from grapes grown in Missouri and their website claims that nearly 100% of their grapes are grown in vineyards directly under their control and management.

Kirkwood, MO is a St. Louis suburb with a quaint downtown business district with restaurants and shops. D’Vine Wine of Kirkwood is a small winery located in one of the downtown storefronts. The interior of the shop feels like an Olive Garden or an Italian Restaurant of some kind that is contrived, commercial, and unoriginal. Wine is made and bottled on site from juice that is purchased from around the world. Someone else does the grape growing, someone else does the grape processing, and then D’Vine purchases the juice to make their wine.

Heather and I visited both of these wineries a couple of weeks ago when we were in St. Louis visiting her sister and I immediately thought of this morning’s parable – the Parable of Old and New Wine.

I have confessed this before, but I want to own up to it again this morning, I'm not one who particularly likes change. For the last 10 years or so, when a shirt has worn out, I've tried to replace it with the same kind of shirt – same goes for belts, shoes, jeans, etc. You get the picture – I like routines, change is a struggle for me. I enjoyed our time at Montelle a lot more than I enjoyed our time at D'Vine. Both had good wine, but for me, being away from the city, in the hills overlooking the river, that's a winery!

But, even given my dislike of change, I have come to learn that change is absolutely inevitable; that there is nothing we can do to control whether or not or how things change. The only thing we can control is how we respond to changes when they do happen.

The parable of old and new wine or the parable of the wineskins is one that is found in all three of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This morning though I want to focus on the version of the story found in Mark because of some particularly cool things that are going on structurally with how the gospel writer frames the parable.

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In order to understand what Jesus is getting at with this parable we need to back up and look at the greater context of what's happening in the text around it. The first seventeen verses of chapter 2 provide us with three important pieces of background that will help us understand the parable. Jesus heals a paralyzed man, then as he travels along the lake he calls Levi to follow him, and finally as he and Levi dine together with tax collectors and sinners the Pharisees grumble and complain. These opening verses of this second chapter of Mark tell us 1) that Jesus forgives and heals, 2) that Jesus calls others

to follow, and 3) that Jesus associates with and eats with the outcasts. These are the kinds of things that Jesus is all about.

Now, let's focus our examination of this parable down yet another notch and look at some of the verses immediately before and after the parable itself. In verses 18-20 we are told that John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting and Jesus' disciples weren't. Some of the Pharisees came to him and asked why they weren't fasting. There was something going on, some celebration or observance and the religious leaders expected that everyone would be fasting. The fact that Jesus and his followers weren't was troubling for these leaders.

Jumping forward then, let's take a look at the few verses that come after our parable. Beginning in verse 23 we are told a story about Jesus and his disciples walking through the cornfields on the Sabbath. As they walked through the field some of Jesus' disciples began to pluck heads of grain and again the Pharisees protested. Harvesting grain would have been considered work and therefore would have been forbidden on the Sabbath. The religious leaders saw Jesus' followers doing this and again called them out on breaking the rules.

What is happening in these two chunks of scripture, these stories about Jesus' disciples not fasting and about them working on the Sabbath, is significant because of a rhetorical device called sandwiching. Sandwiching is when a gospel writer interrupts the telling of a story to make a point. The interjected story or words, in this case the parable in verses 21 and 22 become the meat, the point of what is going on in the greater story that the author is telling.

These two verses then are the meat of what is going on in this second chapter of Mark, the point that Jesus was trying to make with this parable is wrapped up in what is happening in the rest of the chapter. In order for us to fully understand what Jesus is getting at with this parable then we need to understand something about new patches and old wineskins.

First, it is common knowledge among the garment industry that if you sew a new piece of denim that hasn't been preshrunk onto an old, worn pair of jeans, the first time you wash them the new patch will shrink and pull away from the jeans, possibly ripping the older material leaving the jeans a mess. Likewise, in ancient days, before wine bottles were invented, wine was stored in wineskins made of animal hide or gut. If unfermented wine (new wine) was put into a wineskin that had been previously used, the fermentation process would burst the wineskin. So, when we compare the parable to the stories about the Pharisees and their criticism of Jesus that precedes and follow it we can see that the point Jesus is trying to make is that new ideas aren't always compatible with old practices.

New ideas aren't always compatible with old practices. Jesus understood this, but he didn't let it hold him back in his life and in his ministry. He wasn't primarily concerned with doing things the way they had always been done, he was concerned about forgiveness, healing, calling people into relationship with God, and reaching out to the outcasts of the world. Jesus took risks and tried new things, understanding that sometimes these new things, these new wineskins were needed to transport the radical message of God's unconditional love.

One of the ways in which this parable is often used is as justification for starting a new type of worship service within a church – creating a new wine skin that can hold and support and stretch and grow with the new wine. This is exactly what Ridge did several years ago now when making the decision to start Solid Ground. One option would have been to bring a band into 8:30 and 11:00, to try to change those two services, to fill them with new wine if you will. This parable tells us though, that to do so would have likely caused these services to fail, or at least to fail to continue meeting the needs of people who experience God’s presence through traditional worship settings.

Let’s turn now to look at how this parable can speak to us as individuals and let’s go back for a minute now to the idea of the inevitability of change. One of my favorite bumper stickers reads, “Change is Inevitable: Growth is Optional.” As a community and as individual members of that community we must be realistic about the fact that things change. I said earlier, we can’t control when or how things are going to change, we can only control how we’re going to respond when things do change. We can either choose to learn from the change, adapt to the change, and grow; or we can resist the change, fight for the status quo, and struggle. This is true for communities of faith, but it is also true for us as individuals.

Let’s return now for a minute to the main point of Jesus’ parable, that new ideas aren’t always compatible with old practices and let’s spend some time talking about the change that is happening all around us and how we might respond to that change.

One of the biggest things changing for many people right now is summer coming to a close and the new school year beginning. During our Wednesday afternoon Bible Study the last couple of weeks the youth have begged me to stop using the “S-word” –

school. I think several of them are in the midst of a classic case of denial about the new school year starting! Each young person who is going to school this year, rather it be to preschool for the first time or into their last year of college, will experience an increased work load and a change in routine. And so each person has options – to resist the change, to long for things to be the way they were in the previous year, or to choose to seek ways to grow in the midst of the change that is happening to and around them.

A great deal of change is also happening for many of you as you and your loved ones continue to age. Many people in our world today have just finished raising their children and now find themselves as the primary caregivers for their adult parents. As our health and the health of our loved ones change we can resist the reality, deny the facts, and hide from the truth, kicking and struggling along the way. Or we can choose to make the best of trying and difficult situations to adapt and to grow from the change that is happening.

If we want to successfully survive the change that happens to us and around us we have to make intentional decisions. New ideas, after all, aren't always compatible with old practices. As a new school year begins, as students and teachers and families set goals for the coming year, sleep habits might have to change, personal health, eating, and exercise habits might have to change. As we address the realities of our own health and that of our loved ones difficult decisions have to be made about living arrangements, health care and more. Sacrifices have to be made that can allow us to adapt in healthy ways to the change that life throws at us so that we might grow.

While it might not be quite on the same scale of adding a new worship service, Ridge Church is again this year making changes to the way things are done and our hope

is that these changes will allow members and friends of Ridge to make changes to their routines as well. Our youth primarily attend 9:45 and then many of them come back for youth group on Sunday nights at 6:00. Over the last several years it has become increasingly difficult to get youth to be involved in Sunday school classes at 11:00am because of the other demands on their schedules. We acknowledge that youth are busy and have realized that Sunday mornings might not be the ideal time for Educational opportunities – so we're moving youth education to Wednesday evenings.

We also acknowledge that families are busy, and that when both parents work it is more than a full evening to get everyone home, get the kids fed, and figure out what is next. We have realized that it is often hard for parents to make it to studies at the church and for families to get their kids to different activities when things are happening all through the week on different nights and at different times. So, this school year we're kicking off WWE@Ridge – our Wonderful Wednesday Evenings program so that families can gather with their greater church family, share a meal, and then be involved with educational and faith enriching activities for people of all ages.

The world has changed and so rather than resisting that change or grumbling about that change, Ridge Church has decided to take intentional steps, hoping to be able to grow as we respond to the needs of that changing world. Plan to come out, to be a part of all of the great things that are going to be going on on Wednesday evenings. We've published these small books that contain information about everything that is going to be happening on Wednesdays this fall, pick one up, share it with your friends, plan to come out and to be a part of what is going on.

New ideas aren't always compatible with old practices. As things change around us, we have to make intentional choices to adapt and to grow. Even though I prefer wineries like Montelle, located on the bluffs overlooking the river, I can see the value in new places like D'Vine. And just because some people prefer traditional worship, I hope that all can see the value of having started Solid Ground. And just because some of us might prefer that there weren't sporting events and things on Sundays, and while some of us might wish that the world around us hadn't changed the way it has in the last decade or so, I hope that we can all find opportunities for growth, personally and as a community, in the midst of the change that surrounds us. After all, Jesus is still about the work of forgiving and healing, he is still about the work of calling people to follow, and he is still about the work of reaching out to outcasts; and in the midst of it all he calls us to transform our lives and to join him in being a part of all of that work.