

## **January 21st: Pour**

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

*Jesus Our Storyteller, with your words you remind us of uncomfortable but necessary truths—with your teachings you impart wisdom that our foolish and wayward hearts need to hear. As we enter into a time of sacred contemplation, prepare our minds for the message that you have for us this morning. Make us ready to receive your message of hope and justice, equip us to be new wine in new wineskins for the revitalization of your kingdom. In your son’s name we pray, Amen.*

Today we return to the world of the first century and the ministry of Jesus—and we once again look at how his time on earth led to a movement that changed our world. The Gospel of Mark, one of four accounts of Jesus' life, tells us that immediately after calling his disciples, and starting his tour of the land of Israel, Jesus makes a trip to the city of Capernaum. In that city, Jesus dazzles a crowd by healing a paralyzed man, and everyone leaves that encounter saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" But despite this miracle, this crowd of teachers of the law quickly turns on him in our passage for today—responding to Jesus with anger and fear rather than amazement.

At the beginning of our story, we see that Mark is focused on Jesus' role as a spiritual teacher, so we know that the message Mark wants his audience to understand is embedded in these teachings of Jesus. This time, Jesus is by the shores of a lake, and while he is teaching, he encounters a man named Levi, who is seated at the tax collector's booth—presumably working as a tax collector. Jesus asks Levi to follow him, and Levi responds by doing so.

This brief interaction must have resulted in some kind of formal acquaintance, because we then learn that Jesus has been invited to Levi's house for dinner. But this is no ordinary dinner party, because the rest of Levi's guests are described as "many tax collectors and sinners," which our gospel author seems to indicate has a negative connotation.

And this negative connotation was definitely real for people in Jesus' time. In this era of Roman occupation, there were many taxes that were imposed on local people and provinces of the empire. It was a heavy burden for individuals and communities, and Jesus' homeland of Galilee was particularly affected by these many costs because it was a poorer and less economically developed region. And even more than this heavy taxation, Jews of this time period were not happy about foreign rule and the corruption that was built into the system. In many locations, tax collectors acted on behalf of the empire, often collecting more than was due, and using the rest to line their own pockets.

As you can imagine, for Jews like Levi who chose to become tax collectors, there was a high social cost to this decision. This would have been seen as a

betrayal of their people, and a conscious effort to support the unjust institutions and leadership that made life for the Jewish people difficult during this period. In many rabbinical texts from this time period, we find that tax collectors are lumped together with robbers and thieves, and our gospel author is quick to associate tax collectors with a more general label of “sinners.” And it’s not just the Gospel of Mark that does this—both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke share this profoundly distrustful view of tax collectors.

In verses 16 and 17 we read that this new relationship with Levi is already causing conflict for Jesus, and Mark records this: “When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

In verse 18, we hear that there’s another conflict on the horizon because Jesus and his followers are not fasting like the other religious leaders and their followers. When he is questioned about this, Jesus’ response includes this statement: “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

At first glance, these statements by Jesus might seem unintelligible to modern ears, as most of us simply buy new clothing when ours has worn out, and we know that the wine in our grocery stores comes in glass bottles instead of wineskins—but I think the wisdom here still applies.

Jesus explains that when a patch of unshrunk cloth, that is, a patch that has not been washed, is applied to a torn garment and then washed together, the patch will then shrink and pull away from the seams—creating an even larger tear in the fabric. The right fibers need to be chosen for the specific task of the garment. And then we hear Jesus tell his audience that when new wine is

poured into old wineskins, that is vessels that are made from the skins of animals, the wineskins will burst—because the wine as it ages creates gasses and reactions that stretch the wineskins and cause it to break. New wine needs to be poured into new wineskins—so that the fresh wineskins can stretch to fit the wine as it ferments. Pouring the new into the old is choosing the wrong vessel for the contents.

When we combine these insights with Jesus' claim to have come for the sick instead of the healthy, we see that Jesus has given his critics clues into his true purpose and his true vision for this ministry to God's people. Through these metaphors and statements, Jesus has revealed that his actions have intentionally broken away from traditional understandings or institutional practices or the preference of existing leadership.

Jesus seems to be pretty clear that he sees this earthly ministry as something new and something revolutionary. Jesus understands that this work of teaching, and healing, and eating with sinners is about a bigger story of restoration and transformation. It's about reaching the people that need hope and redemption the most, it's about demonstrating a new way of being that is loving and just, it's about fresh perspectives and ideas that can't be contained by old wineskins. It's like wine that is getting ready to expand.

But you might be asking, what do all of these metaphors and clues have to do with us?

Well, I think Jesus shares these pieces of wisdom because he's trying to call disciples who will join him in this revolutionary and expansive work. I think Jesus says these things in front of his followers, because he's hoping that they will participate and help lead this movement of redemption and transformation. And this includes you and me, my friends, it includes all of us who profess to be Christians, no matter our time or our place. Jesus invites us into this work, he longs for us to also seek out sinners in need of hope, and he has given us all kinds of new wine to pour into new wineskins. He's given us compassionate hearts, fresh ideas and big dreams that shouldn't go to waste.

I say all of this because we have recently entered a new calendar year, and because we are today launching our Stewardship campaign for 2024, I want us to also understand that our purpose here is also part of a bigger story. Yes, we are talking about money and resources, but it's more than that—what we're really discussing is participating in the Kingdom that Jesus is bringing into being.

Like Jesus, we are starting something new—we are embarking on a new adventure together, we are building a movement that we hope will lead to restoration and transformation for our city and our community.

When we launched our church's vision in September and laid out our bold moves—we put ourselves on a path towards being a more invigorated and a growing, intergenerational community. We now have this collective dream, we have this plan to turn our beautiful building into a community hub, we have projects that we are working on because they get us closer to our goal of full financial sustainability—it's all new wine in new wineskins—something new, something fresh, something expansive.

We've had volunteers join in our basement clearouts—to prepare that space for new opportunities, we've had meetings with a design firm called Plain Joe to discuss renovation possibilities, we've made strategic hires to help lead us into this exciting season. We're starting ministries to serve the long, lonely, and hopeless in Bremerton, and we know that Jesus is calling us into these spaces because he did not come for the healthy, but for the sick. We're intentionally seeking out the kind of people that Jesus would have shared a table with, because like Levi the tax collector, they answer the call when Jesus beckons.

We've had people pour time, and energy and resources into this congregation, and I'm so thankful that many of you continue to do so. I'm grateful that you've poured your hearts into our vision and into our future—we could not do this restorative and transformative work with you. And because I believe in the progress we're making and the goals that we've set, I'm going to ask you to continue this outpouring and I promise that none of it goes to waste. New wine in new wineskins never does.

So if you also believe in the work that we're doing, and the community that we are striving to be, we invite you to partner with us this year—in whatever way you sense that God is leading you.

In the Stewardship letter that was mailed to you and shared with you here last Sunday—you'll have seen a graphic included—an image that is meant to illustrate what we call "the stewardship path." If this is the first time that you're seeing a path like this or a graphic like this, I'll explain in just a moment. But before I do, I want to make it clear that not every person needs to be at the same place on the path—that's not the point. Only you can discern where God is calling you to be, we hope that you will pray and reflect on how God might be asking you to join this movement.

If you have never participated or donated to a church before, we would be honored to welcome you as a First Time Giver. If you are feeling led to take that first step, we want to thank you for having the courage to step out in faith.

If you've been part of our congregation for a little while, and you've given to support specific initiatives or service projects like special offerings or the Little Blue Pantry, we celebrate you one of our Intentional Givers. We love your compassion and willingness to partner with us in our ministries, so thank you for giving in this way!

Perhaps you sense that God is calling you into a new stage of your giving, and you desire to increase your giving—whether that's by a dollar amount or a percentage—whether that's a big or small increase—we celebrate you as one of our Growing Givers! Your increasing support means so much to us, and we are grateful for your ongoing support.

For those of you who have been part of our community for a long time and give on a weekly or monthly basis, we could not do this work without you! You might be a Consistent Giver—and that faithfulness is something that we want to honor during this campaign!

And last but certainly not least, if you fall into the category of an Extravagant Giver—you are a pillar of our church. Your generosity has kept our staff, our

programming, our mission going, and we are truly blessed by that level of trust and kindness.

So whether it's a trickle or a pour or somewhere in between, we want you to know that every gift is treasured and celebrated. Every outpouring of love and generosity is an act of faithfulness to our mission. Every offering empowers our congregation to serve as Jesus served, and to love as he loved.

So my friends, join us as we pour out our praise to our expansive God.

Amen.