The Kingdom of God is Like…

All Things New

Mark 2:18-22

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 7, 2022 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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18 Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ 19 Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

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.’ (Mark 2:18–22, NRSV)

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The story is told of the pastor church who realized that the piano in the church sanctuary, which for years had sat on the left side of the platform, needed to be moved to the right side of the platform to accommodate some new things the leadership wanted to try in worship. To his surprise, however, this small change was met with great resistance. The piano had always been on the left side of the sanctuary and that’s where it would always remain. The reasons were important, even sacred, though nobody could quite remember what they were.

Years later, well into his retirement, this same pastor visited his old congregation one Sunday morning and was shocked to see the piano had moved to the right side of the sanctuary. Nobody seemed to mind. After the service he approached the current pastor and asked, “How in the world did you get the piano?” “I never did,” he said. “Every day I just moved it one inch until it eventually ended up where we needed it to be. Nobody ever noticed and so nobody ever said a word.”

There is something in us that naturally resists change, even when it comes one inch at a time. For many of us as we grow older, we can even develop a dislike of all things new and unfamiliar. We get stuck in our ways and find it hard to entertain new ways of acting and thinking. Sadly, this can be especially true in churches, where change is often very unwelcome. Just this week a denominational leader told me she is regularly called in as a referee in congregations who are in the midst of fierce battles over the introduction of new music. Though the Bible regularly commands us to sing a new song, we always want to stick with what we know.1 It’s been said before that the seven last words of the church are, “We never did it that way before.”

This isn’t a new problem. The account from Mark’s Gospel we just read is a case in point. The Jewish leaders and their followers in those days had a certain way of doing things. One of the central practices of their faith was the practice of fasting, which is the abstaining from food for spiritual reasons. Though Jews were only required to fast one day a year, on the Day of Atonement, stricter Jews, especially those who wanted to be seen in good standing not only with God but among their peers, fasted twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays. In general, when a person fasted he or she took time to remember either past sin or past disaster. It’s for similar reasons that many Christians fast on days like Good Friday. Naturally, fasting was and is a serious and somber practice.

So the Jewish leaders notice one day that Jesus isn’t requiring his disciples to fast like everybody else. Even John the Baptist has his disciples fast! Jesus is already suspect in their eyes. In the previous passage the religious leaders, the “Serious Ones” as we’ve called them before, are beside themselves because Jesus is attending parties with riff raff. Now he is bucking the trend when it comes to the sacred practice of fasting, and teaching others to do the same.

In response to their protest, Jesus sees a teachable moment. Does Jesus ever not see a teachable moment? And though his teaching in that moment was directed

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1 Psalm 96:1 – “O sing to the Lord a new song!” This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
to a specific group of people at a specific time in history, it is timeless truth, like all of God’s Word is timeless truth, as relevant to us today as it ever has been.

In response to those who have a hard time embracing the new thing God is doing in their midst, Jesus offers three short parables about a wedding feast, a old cloak, and new wineskins. The poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, once wrote,

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God.
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

Most of us miss it most of the time. Jesus never missed it. He lived so close to his Father that everything around him spoke to him about the Kingdom of Heaven. Even old cloaks and new wineskins have something to show us about the coming of this new reality into the world. We need to learn to let Jesus help us pay better attention.

First, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a wedding feast. This was an analogy Jesus often made, and there was no doubt that it always caught the attention of his audience. Most everybody loves a wedding, especially in those days. A Jewish wedding back then was more like a modern vacation, not only for the newlyweds, but for everybody they knew! Right after the ceremony the couple would go to their home and all their friends and family would join them for a party that lasted for a full seven days! The finest food, drink and fun were made available to all. There was even a rabbinic ruling that stated, “All in attendance on the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy.”

In a life wrought with hardship, a wedding week was the best week of your life.

So who fasts at a wedding? That’s Jesus’ point. A wedding is a time for indulgence. At my wedding we feasted. One of my groomsmen came up during the reception and hugged me with tears in his eyes. I wasn’t expecting the reason he gave me for his gratitude. He could not believe that we had paid for an open bar. I kept an eye on him all night. A wedding is not a time for fasting. To do so would not only be unnatural, but rude and selfish towards the ones being celebrated.

Jesus compares what was happening in those days to a wedding feast. He goes further and declares that he, himself, is the bridegroom at the party. It’s imagery often used throughout scripture, God as the bridegroom and Israel, or later the church, as his bride. It’s beautiful imagery because it speaks to the love and devotion God has for his people, and also to our cause for celebration, that there is no reason for sorrow, and plenty to go around for everybody. And so when the bridegroom is present with the bride, as Jesus was then present in the flesh with his people, there is no time for somber practices like fasting.

Understand that Jesus isn’t against fasting. Remember that he fasted himself for 40 days in the wilderness before he began his public ministry.

Even here he says that there will be a time for fasting later on when he is taken away from them. Fasting, in fact, has been a very helpful practice for Christians down through the ages, including for many of us. Jesus’ point is simply that these people were so stuck in their old ways that they could not recognize, much less embrace, the new thing that God was doing right before their eyes.

Then, because Jesus is a very generous and patient teacher, he gives two more short parables to emphasize his point. Verse 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.” A piece of new cloth will shrink with time and when washed. If you sew it into old fabric, it will eventually tear the fabric when it shrinks. Verse 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.” There we no such thing as bottles in Jesus’ day. So animal skins were used to hold wine. When they were new they had a certain elasticity, which was necessary because new wine was still fermenting and gave off gases which caused pressure. But old wineskins were done stretching, which meant that the pressure caused from new fermenting wine would cause them to burst, ruining both the wine and the skin.

The point of both parables is the same. New cloth and new wine are alive, in the sense that they are not static. They are moving and changing, not fixed in form or size. So the new and the old, in this sense, do not mix well. The form must fit the function. New things do not always mesh well with old ways of thinking and acting.

There is a theme throughout scripture that I suspect you have noticed. It’s the reality that God is making all things new. God doesn’t throw things away. He’s the great recycler, one who redeems and restores, rather than destroys and discards. I think of that great

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b See Mark 1:12-13
As Christ ushers the Kingdom of Heaven into this world, the range of God’s effective will is extending further and further into his creation. God is doing something entirely new, redeeming and restoring all that has been lost or corrupted. This means that the old ways of thinking and living won’t work anymore. What is coming is too dynamic, too explosive. Christ can’t be integrated into, or contained by, preexisting structures and patterns, even Judaism! You can’t just add Jesus as an accessory to your already full agenda and preoccupations. He is asking us to forsake business as usual and join him in the wedding celebration. That means that our unwillingness to stretch will not work if we try to sew Jesus into our lives as they are. We must become entirely new receptacles for the expanding fermentation of the Kingdom of God in this world.5

What’s a sermon from me without at least one Dallas Willard quote? In his book The Divine Conspiracy, Willard asserts that the gospel peddled in much of the contemporary church has become what he calls “the gospel of sin management.” His observation is that for some time now those in the more evangelical or theologically liberal wings of the church have limited the good news of the gospel to the individual forgiveness of sin. Trust in Jesus and he will forgive your sins and punch your ticket so you’re ready to go to heaven when you die. True change in your life will happen then in the next life. A famous saying, cliche enough to fit on a bumper sticker, captures this sentiment perfectly: “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.”

An equal and opposite error has rooted itself in the more progressive or theologically liberal wings of the church, where many have concluded that the good news of the gospel is essentially about the removal of social or structural evils. For many today, especially in the mainline church, involvement in particular social justice efforts is really the essence of one’s Christian faith. However else you live your life, the one unforgivable sin, the thing that might keep you out of step with Jesus, is non-engagement with specific social issues. In fact, it’s not even as important what you believe about Jesus, as long as you agree with him about his love for the marginalized. The cross itself then becomes just an example of love, not the pathway we are to follow, dying to all of ourselves as we follow Jesus. This bumper sticker might read, “Christians aren’t perfect, just committed to social justice.”

Now, does the Christian gospel include the forgiveness of individual sin? Absolutely. Does Jesus teach us to seek justice for those who are marginalized in our world? Absolutely. The problem is that these

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5 Isaiah 43:18-19

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approaches, though seemingly different, are both obsessed with the very same thing, which is sin management. Get Jesus to forgive my individual sin and then I’m good to go. Do enough justice work in the world, or at least give the impression that I’m for that sort of work, and then I’m good to go. Neither is really about the transformation of the total person, the transformation of all of society, the transformation of all creation being made new.

We must understand that a Christian is not merely a person who is forgiven and ready to die and face the judgment of God. Neither is a Christian merely a person who has an identifiable commitment to love and justice in society. If you are a Christian you are a person – I hope you’re getting this by now! – who has committed your entire life to following Jesus, to living life as Jesus would live life if he were in your shoes. A Christian is one whose ordinary life is being made entirely new from the inside out to resemble, in every way, Christ. We are to be formed in Christ and have Christ formed in us! To be a Christian is to be a disciple; they are one in the same and Jesus never once suggested otherwise. In Willard’s words, “The entire biblical tradition from beginning to end is one of the intimate involvement of God in human life – or else alienation from it.” In Jesus’ words, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

I could give you a thousand ways this plays out in the life of a disciple. As commentator N.T. Wright puts it, “A good deal of day-to-day Christian wisdom consists in sorting out the new from the old.” Jesus is doing a new thing in and around us and inviting us to let him make us new creations in an increasingly new creation, the old gone and the new come. Let me give you a few examples.

As I mentioned earlier, this whole teachable moment likely originated because the religious leaders were irked with Jesus because he partied with the sorts of people they imagined God wanted nothing to do with. So who are the people you imagine God wants nothing to do with? I bet you can come up with a few. Could it be God is doing a new thing, coming alongside people you wouldn’t be caught dead with?

Jesus assures us constantly that everything is in God’s hands, that you have a Father in heaven who doesn’t let go unnoticed even one hair falling from your head. And yet how many of us continue to be wracked with worry and anxiety about the state of things in our lives and in our world? Why do we cling to these old ways when God has something entirely new in store for us?

It was reported recently that Tiger Woods turned down $4 billion dollars to play in the new LIV golf league. This week I listened to sports radio commentators besides themselves, horrified that a person could ever pass up that much money. But that’s the old, old thinking in our world, that joy and security are all tied up with material wealth. Have we allowed Jesus to teach us a new way of thinking that ties true joy and security into an entirely new foundation?

Our world is as tribal and divided today as it has ever been, or as it has always been. It’s an old, old way of doing things. But Jesus is ushering in a kingdom where nobody is divided by the color of their skin, or the preference of their politics, or the varying amounts of money in their bank account, or the name on their passport, or any other distinction we use to divide. Are we conforming to this new community which one day will be the only community?

You see, the world around us likes to imagine itself as incredibly and increasingly relevant. It’s not. It’s just new packaging and branding on the same old stale goods. In every way Jesus is inviting us into a new reality which is perpetually being made new. It’s what Paul meant when he wrote in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” C.S. Lewis liked to think about the Kingdom of God as something which is ever expanding and refreshing in this way. In his words, “The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside.”

I find it interesting that some of the youngest people I meet are old people. Their bodies are failing them, but their spirits seem to grow younger every day. Typically, these people are people who love Jesus, and have loved Jesus for some time. It makes sense to me why Jesus said at one point, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” The great Scottish theologian, William Barclay, once received a letter from an old man, a friend of his, which was signed, “Yours aged 83 and still growing.” Regardless of your age,

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8 C.S. Lewis, The Last Battle (Harper Trophy, 1956), 224.

9 Mark 10:15

10 Barclay, 62.
can you sign your letters like that and mean it. This is what Christ would have for us, increasing conformity to a coming Kingdom in which he is making everything perpetually new and everything permanently young.

In a moment we will all be invited to come to the Lord’s Table and share in the Lord’s Supper. As you prepare to come, be reminded that this is not an old, dead ritual. Though it is full of mystery, it’s our conviction that we share this table and this meal with the living, resurrected Christ, and that it is grace that he has on the menu for us, grace that not only forgives but has the power to transform and make new and alive everything old and dead. It’s brilliant that Jesus chose to meet us this way in a meal, a meal in which we literally eat the bread and drink from the cup, because you cannot eat and drink half way. Eating and drinking are acts of full commitment because you take something into yourself completely, that it might be formed in you and you formed by it.

So here’s the invitation. If you are somebody who trusts Christ, not just to forgive your sins and take you to heaven when you die, and not just to show you how to work for justice in this life, but someone you trust enough to place your whole life in his hands that he might make you into a new creation which will fit well into the rest of his new creation, then know that you are invited to come and take part in this feast which Christ himself has prepared for those he loves.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Re-read the passage again from Mark 2:18–22. What do you notice? What stands out to you?

2. The passage just before this is the account of Jesus partying with his new disciple Levi and a bunch of his tax collector friends. This infuriates the religious leaders. Do you see any connection between the two passages?

3. In response to this protest about neglecting fasting, Jesus tells three short parables about a wedding feast, an old cloak, and new wineskins. How do these three parables connect? Or do they? What is the main point?

4. What is it about us that generally makes us so resistant to change and to new ways of thinking or living? How do you see this in yourself?

5. We read in scripture that Christ is making all things new, and not just new put perpetually new. What do you think this means? How do you see this playing out around you?

6. What new thing do you think Jesus wants to do today in your life? Do you trust him to let him have his way?

7. What new thing do you believe Jesus is wanting to do here at Faith Presbyterian Church? Do you sense an openness among us?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.

Do you think God likes new things or old things?