

New Wine for New Wineskins
King's Chapel Midweek Service

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January 22nd, 2014

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak... neither is new wine put into old wineskins...”

Change is in the atmosphere of our scripture reading today. As Jesus feasts with his disciples in a time designated for fasting, people have begun to wonder whether this man has any reverence, whether he respects the values of Jewish culture, whether he will corrupt the youths who follow him and lead them down a road that takes them far from their families and traditions... The disciples of John ask directly--“Why don't your disciples fast? We do it, and so do the other pious people. What justifies your exception?”

Jesus responds with two images, and each of these images brings to mind a certain tension between old and new. Imagine that unshrunk cloth patching up a favorite old coat, standing out initially for its more vibrant color against the weathered fabric, but then, shrinking the first time it's been washed, pulling at the seams, and ripping the coat with its newfound pull. The patch, meant to mend, produces an even greater injury in the loved garment. Or consider the wineskin: imagine that old leather stiffened with use, wrinkled and stained, dried-up--no longer a supple bag, but more of a rigid leather cask--and filled with new wine, new lively, fermenting juice. Apparently, given new wine, this old bag will burst; both the container and that precious substance it contains are lost; their incompatibility destroys them both.

The old and the new are pulling at one another in these images, and it seems they may not be able to coexist.

Here at King's Chapel, we too have experienced tension between old things and new things. Here is our grand old cloak, our historic home, and sometimes it needs to be repaired. This presents a problem--will the repairs be too shiny? Will they ruin something we cherish even as they preserve it? How can we meet the challenge of finding the right cloth, of the right texture, hue, weight, and vintage, without having at our disposal the same cloth-maker who made the upholstery that covered our pews two hundred years ago? And here is our loved, loved old Prayerbook. What would happen if we changed the words? Each word in this book was labored over, lovingly and thoughtfully. Each word carries its own history in this community's journey of faith. Each word represents an individual's grappling with meaning through the process of revision this community underwent with Carl Scovel in the 80's. Each word is precious. Changing the words would be like splitting the wineskin--why ruin the beautiful vessel of liturgy with innovation, when all the meaning would spill out. Change is fundamentally threatening.

I have come to believe that a degree of rigidity takes root in all of us. Habit becomes the life raft keeping us afloat in uncertainty. It is a relief from the anguish of an unknown future, to believe that just as I did yesterday I will also do tomorrow: I will rise at 6, make my bed, walk my dog, listen to the news, arrive in the office at 9, and in this manner allow small rituals to carry me through the day, more or less protected from disturbances of the unexpected. Like the Pharisees and the disciples of John, I prefer, very often, the old and familiar assurances of habit to the risk of experiment.

What a contrast we are, each of us, to our own beginnings. Hard to believe there was a time in each of our lives when we were not only willing to try new things, but driven to experiment endlessly, hoping for a successful result but pressing on even through many falls and disappointments. It is truly a miraculous experience to watch the toddler take her first precarious steps, tottering perilously on the edge with each advance, negotiating with gravity in each second of the effort. And in the end, this experimental approach is successful: each of us has learned to walk in this way, without instruction. We quickly forget how gratifying that process has been, favoring instead the tried and true. Most of us, as adults, can go weeks or months, maybe years, without risking novelty. When was the last time you tried something truly new? When was the last time you faced novelty without just a little bit of reluctance? When was the last time 'change' was a word that had a clear, refreshing ring to it?

When the disciples of John approach Jesus to ask "why don't your disciples fast?" Jesus responds with a call to flexibility. There will be a time for fasting, he says, but now is not the time. Now is the time for feasting, because we are together and this is a reason to celebrate. Jesus responds to the disciples of John with a call for enough psychic elasticity to be open to having the right feeling at the right time given the uncertainty of circumstance, rather than the proscribed feeling, given the arbitrary order of routine. Rather than the rigidity which locks us in to endlessly repeating the past in spite of changing circumstance.

Once we have learned how to walk, most of us continue to walk in the same way as long as our bodies hold out. How can we, brittle old wineskins, seasoned by time and injured by life experience, possibly be open to experiments of the new and untested? Hasn't the way we have been walking worked well enough? Won't we fall if we change? Couldn't we be injured? Mightn't we be destroyed if we experiment and fail? Most of the time, novelty simply feels too reckless. Aren't we too fragile to contain new wine? Shouldn't we protect ourselves and our ways of life from forces that threaten to tear us apart at the seams? Elasticity requires enormous strength. But having the strength and flexibility to respond to circumstance, to respond to one another, with the right feeling in the right moment is the only thing that heals our injuries as individuals and as communities. This ability to be empathic and open in the moment to another's experience and to respond with sensitivity to his or her circumstances as he or she is experiencing them is the greatest gift we can give to one another. This is the love that builds community. This is the new standard Jesus sets--to be younger, by living on the edge of known experiences, and to be open there to the truth of new things happening

Our best leaders are those who can help us recover the courage and strength to face change, even as it threatens us. The more rigid our habits have grown, the more fragile they become, the more change becomes a threat to our sense of well-being. As a country we have recently celebrated the dreams of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose non-violent vision for our nation fundamentally threatened the way we were living together. The path forward through Dr. King's vision was an experiment, and through this experiment we lost ourselves as we were, and we found our way into a new, more tolerant, more vibrant life together. Our country became younger and wiser.

This is the good news: There is new wine coming and it will be delicious if we are open to tasting it. It takes great faith to gain the courage to try new things, courage nurtured by love and practice. May we live on the edge of our experiences, supple and receptive to the new wine life has to offer.