

Sick of Religion?: Rule Breaking

Mark 2:18-22

I am delighted to say that last week we did not have a SINGLE complaint on a welcome cards. Woohoo! But someone did take the opportunity of filling out her card to poke a little fun at me. "Suzie Student" lives at 123 Sesame Street in Ougadougou in the state of "confused." Under "date" she wrote, "single." At the bottom she ordered a lettuce and mayo sandwich and a side of sweet potato fries. And on the right where it says, "I want to get baptized, follow Jesus, etc..." Suzie wrote, "I want to "skype a composer...learn to drive, and then rule the world." Very fun!

We continue in our journey through Mark titled, "Sick of Religion." And this evening/morning we come to one of the most controversial and divisive aspects of church life: worship! The way we worship God, regretfully, can be a cause of division inside the church...and a cause for disgust for those on the outside. Our traditions and styles become so important to us, we can end up worshiping our preferences more than the Lord. In this story, we encounter the revered Jewish worship tradition of fasting.

Fasting means going without food for a time as an act of spiritual devotion. In the Old Testament, fasting was almost ALWAYS a symbol of grief. The only regular fast in the Old Testament came once a year on the Day of Atonement when people repented of their sins. The people also fasted in times of national crisis or calamity. But by the time of the New Testament, fasting had been turned into one of the three signs of GENUINE spirituality, the other two being prayer and alms-giving.

Pharisees...the strictest of the Jews...fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Not only that, they made a big show of it. According to Jesus, they would purposely look as hungry and miserable as possible so that everyone would notice they were fasting and be impressed by how spiritual they were. Fasting was a badge of spiritual honor. If you were a good rabbi...if you were a true worshiper of God...you fasted. Mark 2: 18-22

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?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins."

Weddings in the Middle East are a BIG deal. Cyndi and I flew over for the wedding of a Muslim friend of ours. The reception and dinner was epic: food, gifts, dancing, lots of smoking. It went on for hours...and we began to wonder if we would ever get to bed. Finally, we cried "Uncle" and returned to our hotel in the early morning hours. There was only ONE person who left earlier than us. And we found out that it was –I'm not kidding—an elderly woman with terminal cancer who had only a few months to live. She's the only one we outlasted. Our friends were not impressed with our stamina!

But that was nothing compared to the partying that occurred at weddings in Jesus' time. A wedding lasted seven days! The guests didn't worry about a thing; all was provided! Food, wine, music, dancing...the festivities went on for a week, spilling out into the streets. This celebration was so important to community life that even rabbis were exempted from their religious duties so they could participate.

Imagine, then, if wedding guests showed up expecting a week of partying and instead were told, "Yeah...we're trying something new. We are going to fast. A week of bread and water. L'chaim!" It would have been the ultimate social faux pas!

A group of people approach Jesus in this story and seem to be asking, "What kind of rabbi are you? You and your disciples don't even fast?" And Jesus uses the analogy of the wedding feast to show how inappropriate it was. Fasting was primarily a show of sorrow...largely because the people of Israel were waiting for God's deliverance through their long-awaited Messiah. Well, Jesus says, "I'm here. That for which you have waited and fasted and prayed...that day has come. This is a time to celebrate! Fasting...sorrow... is incompatible with this moment!"

This might make sense to us, but it was upsetting to those people because...they were used to worshipping God in a certain way. The traditions they had developed regarding fasting, even though they weren't biblical, had become precious to them. For Jesus NOT to worship God in their way...in the way of the Pharisees and others ...was unsettling. It seemed to disrespect what was right and proper and sacred.

It's not that Jesus wasn't respectful of Jewish traditions. Jesus was an observant Jew. He went to synagogue. He went to Jerusalem for the festivals. He worshiped in the temple. He knew and quoted the Old Testament. He prayed. He even wore a traditional Jewish prayer shawl with tassels. But what he refused to do was be forced into the box of man-made forms of worship. His point wasn't that fasting was bad; his point was that fasting wasn't appropriate for that season.

That's the thing about worship traditions and styles. They might be VERY good, VERY important, VERY relevant, VERY life-giving. But they can also become brittle. They become the MEANS instead of the END. We can be more focused on our styles and traditions than we are on the God they are intended to worship.

Jesus drives home this point with two adages. You can't put a new patch on old material because the new patch will shrink, rip out the stitches and the tear will be worse than when you started. And you cannot put new wine into old wineskins. Now ...why not? Wineskins were made out of fresh animal skin. New wine was poured into the new, supple skin. As the wine fermented and expanded, the wineskin was elastic enough to expand with it.

Old wineskins were fine for holding old wine... which was still perfectly good wine, by the way! But if you tried to contain the bubbling, fermenting work of new wine in an old, brittle wineskin...everything was destroyed. The wine AND the skin.

One of the great challenges facing the church in every generation is that we focus on the skins and not the wine. We can't help it. We fall in love with certain ways of worshiping God and soon, instead of it being our preference, it becomes the ONLY acceptable way and anything else is unchristian. We cling to structures of worship that were once new, fresh, flexible ...but are not so much anymore. We want God to do a new work...we want the Holy Spirit stirring in our church...but we want Him to do that within our old wineskins. And Jesus says, it just won't work.

This is one of the things we've been reminded of this last year. Our elders sensed that God wanted to do a new work in us. We had become inwardly- focused and needed to turn our hearts outward; to welcome newcomers into our family. So we made some changes. And when the Spirit began making new wine... we

started straining at the seams a little bit. And by the way, I'm speaking to myself! I've been here 32 years. Everything we do here, including worship, has my fingerprints all over it! When you change something around here, you're changing with MY stuff.

Now we're doing fine. This is not the first time Chapel Hill has navigated change and growth. We are figuring out how to balance respect for older ways with an openness to the new. But change...especially in beloved forms of worship...is hard.

Would it encourage you to learn that EVERY generation has faced this challenge? Dwight L. Moody, the great 19th century evangelist, got his start in Scotland. Many churches united to support his crusade. But one group, the arch-Calvinists in the Highlands, refused because, among other things, Moody had them singing hymns. The Highlanders only sang the Psalms; they considered every other type of music as unbiblical and unchristian. And what bugged them particularly was Moody's use of a modern, loud musical instrument called the "pump organ." The Highlanders called it the "kist-o-whistles"...the chest of whistles, and that was not a compliment. So, one day when the wagon carrying the pump organ turned a corner too quickly and dumped the out on the street, the Highlanders viewed this as God's divine judgment upon this satanic musical instrument. That was the 19th century.

15 years ago, I attended a gathering of pastors. During one of our sessions, the local pastor read a letter written to that church's session back in the 1930s. It complained that one of the songs in worship was too modern. It catered too much to the youth and did not possess the dignity or theological integrity of the great hymns of the church. The writer claimed to represent a segment of the congregation who were offended by this modern innovation and adamant that the elders prohibit this song in all future worship services. The name of that offensive "contemporary song?" "Great is Thy Faithfulness."

In every age, Christians have struggled with new expressions of worship. I'm sure that in the 12th century, there were letters written to the bishop complaining about those radical, chanting monks. We all become attached to our wineskins...and forget that it's really about the wine. And by the way, those who love the newest thing can be JUST as judgmental and brittle as their older brothers and sisters. It is one thing to say, "The hymns just don't speak to me. It is another to say, "Those hymns are dead and worthless." All of us are capable of becoming brittle and inflexible. All of us can become focused on the wineskin...instead of the wine.

One of the things I love about this passage is, Jesus doesn't say, "Throw out the old! Get rid of fasting." In fact, actually refers to a time when it will be appropriate to fast. When he, the bridegroom, is taken from them. Jesus is not saying that fasting is bad, old garments are bad, old wine is bad. He's saying, don't get so focused on...so attached to...your old beloved forms, that you can't make room for a new, fresh work of the Holy Spirit.

If I were to ask, "Do you want the Holy Spirit to do something new, exciting and life-giving in this congregation?"...most of you would say, "Yes." Not all; some folks would rather keep things as they are. But most of us...when asked this would say... "Of course, we want the Holy Spirit to have his way. Or course we do!" Well...that is a dangerous prayer. Because the Holy Spirit, once invited in, is impossible to contain! He will bubble and ferment and expand and strain...until the new work he wants to do is accomplished! We can murmur about it. Grumble about it. Or we can throw our hands up in the air like a giant roller coaster ride and say, "Here we goooo!"

The Holy Spirit is doing a new work in us. That is not cause for mourning. It is cause for celebration! Which is what we are doing here. When we come to the table of the Lord, we tend to do so very soberly. And that is certainly one appropriate way to approach communion. But an EQUALLY appropriate way is to come with

JOY and THANKSGIVING...like the wedding guests! Bubbling with gratitude for the gift of life Jesus offers us; the gift we remember when we gather round this table.

So...as you come forward to receive the elements today, I'd invite you to try something our Mexico Mission kids did when THEY took the Lord's supper. After they received both elements, they said, "Thank you, Jesus!" So...I invite you, after you receive the bread and the juice, to say...as loud as your Presbyterian self will allow you to say it... "Thank you Jesus!" Let's come to this festival of joy.