

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 5:33-6:11

"New Wine"

Jews of the 1st century were divided over how to be "good Jews" after four centuries of foreign rule by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, Romans. Some simply cooperated with the occupiers, others resisted or even revolted; and some made strenuous efforts to define socially how they were different from their Gentile overlords. Sociologists call this "setting boundary markers" for the community - creating activities that mark out who is who, and give people a sense of identity and of belonging.

So for the whole Second Temple period from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah through to the destruction of the Temple by Roman legionaries in 70 AD - the time of the growth of "rabbinic Judaism" - the emphasis was on Sabbath observance, circumcision, the food laws, fasting, tithing, and a clear separation of "clean" and "unclean." While the Essenes practiced these things in closed communities, the Pharisees tried to promote them throughout Israel.

So arrives Jesus, challenging these social and behavioral markers at almost every point. And he seems to be doing it deliberately, as though he is signaling the end of Jewish exclusiveness as the "people of God." We've seen him sharing the table with "tax-collectors and sinners," and touching sick people. In today's passages we see him in conflict with the Pharisees over fasting, and most critically, Sabbath observance. What

could you do, or not do, on the Sabbath? Who decides? What is the Sabbath for, anyway?

1) *The Sabbath*

With regard to fasting, Jesus shows that he is not against it in principle, but that this is not the time for it. Fasting is about self-denial, coming into closer contact with God, preparing for a major decision, sometimes mourning. Jesus' answer to why he and his followers don't fast (which Pharisees did twice a week) is simple: "the bridegroom has come," and it's time to feast, not fast. The image comes from prophets like Isaiah and Hosea, where God promises to "re-marry" his errant wife Israel who "ran off with other gods." So Jesus says "rejoice!" - I am the bridegroom - and no fasting is needed right now. But notice the little aside: "the time will come when the bridegroom is taken from you..." - a very early hint that Jesus knows that growing opposition will eventually lead to his death.

The Sabbath was a reflection of God's work in Creation, and God's special gift to his people Israel so they would remember the Exodus. His people "tithed their time" to God - setting aside one day in seven, just as they did one-tenth of their income - to show that they depended on God and could stop work and rest and worship in confidence that God would supply their needs. To be a

Jew was to observe Sabbath, no question about it - it was after all one of the Ten Commandments! But to ensure it was kept well, the rabbis devised dozens of rules on what constituted work and rest, what was forbidden and what was permitted on the Sabbath.

So you could not light a fire, or carry a burden; you could travel only a short distance, you could not work your fields, sowing or reaping. If you served in the military, you could not march long distances, or carry arms on the Sabbath. You could attend or serve at the Temple or synagogue; a male child could be circumcised. You could exert yourself physically to save the life of a person in danger. "Work" was clearly defined; everyone understood that you could not do it on the Sabbath, but here is Jesus and his followers cheerfully plucking grain and "working" at rubbing the ears to get the kernels. Why are they doing this?

Jesus' reply is rather startling: he claims that human need overrides Sabbath restrictions, and even more strikingly, that he, "the Son of Man" has the right understanding of the Sabbath, and the authority to enforce it on his followers. So of course he is quickly observed again by the Scribes and Pharisees to see if he will heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, and almost defiantly he does! Jesus challenges their grasp of the Sabbath principle: *what is this gift of God for?* In his understanding, it is a day for men and women to be rested and restored; it is "a day for their good;" it is therefore a day for doing good! The Pharisees and their friends were so afraid of doing something evil that they would not do anything good!

2) *New Wine*

So Jesus the bridegroom is bringing a new understanding of God's will into 1st century Judaism, and it is not well received by those

who place great store by "the traditions of the elders." They react with a combination of "who does he think he is?" and "we never did that before."

Against this resistance, Jesus likens himself and his mission to "new wine." Young wine is juicy and fruity and still fermenting, and you cannot store it in stiff old wineskins or they will burst. This is a wonderful metaphor, even if it is a long way from our experience of wine-handling! Maybe easier for us to grasp, though less graphic, is when Jesus says his coming is like getting a new suit of clothes which you would never dream of tearing up to make patches that would cover the holes in your old garments!

But "new wine" has stuck with us as Jesus' way of saying that his presence is bound to conflict with the traditions of rabbinic Judaism, that the gospel cannot be contained within Pharisaic rules, that his divine visitation to Israel is going to shake Judaism to the core. Of course many people prefer the old ways; of course many say "the old wine is better." To appreciate the taste of new wine will require people to be made new themselves: they need new minds, new hearts, new garments for the wedding feast - the sort of responses to Jesus that are already appearing among "tax-collectors and sinners," but are clearly going to be rare among Scribes and Pharisees!

3) *Boundaries, Sabbath-Keeping & Doing Good*

What about us? What response does Jesus get from us when he says he has come to "make all things new"?

What about our "boundary markers"? Do we have any idea what they are, and who they keep in, who they keep out, and whether they are the kind that Jesus would overturn in a moment? Religious groups have always had them, of course. Today Orthodox and

Conservative Jews still observe *Shabbat* in closely defined ways – no work, no cars, no traveling long distances, no switching electrical systems on or off; rather lighting candles, saying blessings, eating meals together, prayers, readings, communal worship, intimate family time.

Some Christian groups are well defined by their “boundary markers.” I recall a Baptist Church that friends of ours attended: when the husband was a candidate for the Deacon board, he had to sign a document that he would not drink or smoke, and would tithe his income to the church. 40 years ago, everyone understood the markers of being a Catholic: ashes on Ash Wednesday, fish on Fridays, confession and absolution, weekly Mass (probably in Latin), feasts and fasts of obligation. Today hardly anyone knows what it means to be Catholic – it depends on your priest and bishop! Then there are those Protestant churches with upfront labels: “Peace and Justice,” “Open and Affirming,” “Multiethnic/Multicultural” – you had better understand and accept what these markers mean before you go there.

What about us? What are our markers? Not easy to say, is it? Because markers are often implicit; we don’t notice them. Who do we keep in, and who do we keep out, by our expectations and the way we do things? Do you have to dress a certain way to worship here? I don’t think so! Do you need a certain income level, or have to be a registered Republican, or Democrat? Apparently not! But you do, I suppose, have to gladly enter into what I would call a “traditional” form of worship. I know some of you would like more contemporary “praise songs” in our services, but I have yet to hear anyone asking for drums, guitars and an amplified “worship team” up front; nor for that matter, for video clips projected on the wall.

So I guess that is one kind of boundary. What else? Embracing a certain semi-liturgical worship, with hymns and readings and prayers and sermons – certainly one of the “traditions of the elders” in that you can go into any Congregational Church in the country and instantly recognize the order of worship! I would add a couple of other local markers: that women and men have equal roles in leadership; that we are not separatists, that we do not define ourselves by what we do not do, or what we do not approve. Rather we believe in community involvement, and having open doors to many groups. We emphasize social outreach and helping people in need, as well as evangelical preaching and Bible study. In all this, some would call us “liberal,” while others think we are “very conservative.”

If you seriously disapprove any of these things, I guess you would feel “outside our boundary lines” and would not stay long. If you have stayed a while, I guess you are comfortable within them. And I think it helps if you like coffee, half-and-half and cake...! But what boundary markers would Jesus knock down? Perhaps we should ask ourselves?

Let me say just a little about Sabbath-observance. Some Christian groups gladly transferred “Sabbath rules” into Sunday observance – our Puritan forebears would be a good example. Yet their intent in the 1600s – stated for example in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* – was that the Sabbath should be a day “holy to the Lord,” a day not to work but to rest, a day for private and public worship, a day to attend to “duties of necessity and mercy.” I think that’s still a good recipe, and I have a feeling that New England Puritan families may have enjoyed their Sundays more than we do.

Because for too many of us it’s the only day to clean house, do some grocery shopping,

head to the mall to buy the kids sneakers, drive them to a soccer game. Worship gets wedged in (some weeks), but we can't afford for it to last much over an hour or we get restless thinking of all the other things we have to do today! But God designed *a day for people's good*; the Sabbath is for restoring people to life. And so Jesus said it is also *a day for doing good*. It is for saving life. I think we should re-learn the Sabbath principle. Everyone needs a break! And we need to worship together as a community.

Finally, God deliver us from being so afraid of sins of *commission* – of doing something bad – that we fall into the trap of sins of *omission* – of failing to do something good! And God give us grace to accept that Jesus brings new things into life, that he is “new wine,” and that now and again we need to be shaken out of our complacency and comfort, and thinking that “the old is better.”

Let us pray...