



Sermon, January 28, 2018  
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

## “New Focus”

### Scripture: Mark 2: 13-22

<sup>13</sup> Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. <sup>14</sup> As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

<sup>15</sup> And as he sat at dinner<sup>[b]</sup> in Levi’s<sup>[c]</sup> house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting<sup>[d]</sup> with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. <sup>16</sup> When the scribes of<sup>[e]</sup> the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat<sup>[f]</sup> with tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>17</sup> When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

#### *The Question about Fasting*

<sup>18</sup> Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people<sup>[g]</sup> came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

<sup>21</sup> “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. <sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>[h]</sup>

### Things Jesus Never Said:

1. If You Had More Faith God Would Answer Your Prayer.
2. Doubting Is Dangerous.
3. Here Is How You Can Get to Heaven.
4. There Will Always Be Poor People Among You. Period.
5. God helps those who help themselves.
6. God never gives you more than you can handle.

What might you add?

I would like to add this one: “Keep doing what you’ve always done, and keep thinking the way you’ve always thought.”

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This morning’s cluster of stories from Mark’s Gospel shows the problem with thinking “That’s the way it’s always been.” The last couple of weeks we have seen how Jesus almost explodes upon the scene, preaching and teaching, healing, casting out demons, cleansing people of leprosy, and proclaiming God’s forgiveness of sin. Everywhere, people flocked to him, but there was always that nagging question, “Who is this guy, and why is he doing these things?” Now in this part of Mark’s Gospel, that question starts to take a darker edge.

“Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

“Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

Not only is Jesus doing something against the way things have always been, but he’s just plain wrong. He’s breaking the religious laws. When people confronted him about doing things differently from John’s disciples and the Pharisees, he doesn’t engage in a technical debate about spiritual practices or theology, he refers them to something every seamstress knows: if your garment has a hole in it, and you want to patch it, you need to patch it with material that is as well-used as the garment, or at least has been pre-shrunk. If you put an unshrunk patch on, it will shrink when washed, and tear the garment even more. The new doesn’t always fit well with the old.

And then to make the point even more vivid, he talks about the common practice of storing wine in wineskins. The cover image shows a drawing of one such wineskin. They would use the tanned skin of an animal, often a goat or a sheep, and sew it together to form a bag, they would put the fermented wine into it and then would store it or carry it if it was a smaller bag. Now, the wine would continue to ferment, giving off carbon dioxide gas, and over time the skins would slowly stretch. This was all fine and good, and within normal operating parameters, as we say nowadays. But occasionally some overly thrifty individual would want to reuse the skins after they had been emptied, and would fill them with more new wine, which would continue to ferment. However, the skins had

already been stretched, possibly to their limit, and would eventually burst.

These were observations that everybody knew about. Common. But Jesus has answered their question most profoundly: Something new is happening here, and the old way of doing things just doesn't fit. Jesus is the Master of the New Way. What are some of the new ways demonstrated in these verses?

1. Jesus expands the circle of people at the table. Jesus continues to call people to follow him and learn from him. This time he calls Matthew, a tax collector. Not only does he call him to follow, but then he goes and dines with him, and with some of Matthew's fellow tax collectors. This really rankles the legal purists of the time, because not only were tax collectors collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers, but by mingling with the gentile riff raff, they were rendered unclean. If Jesus knew anything about proper religious behavior, he wouldn't allow himself to become unclean. His reply: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” The religiously pure are already at the table. Jesus has come to expand the circle at the table.

Jesus directs his ministry towards those left out, or cut off, or rebellious, or lost. Here he clarifies it for everybody. He didn't come for the goody-two-shoes, he came for everybody else. Which is a good thing, because if he hadn't, none of us would be here.

2. There are times to celebrate and times to fast. Instead of doing things because they are expected, do things because they will affect a needed change or improvement in life, and are appropriate to the occasion. Don't just keep doing the same old thing simply because you've always done it that way. Instead, do the thing that fits the occasion, and addresses what is needed.
3. That which is new requires a new structure to contain it. This is what's up with the new wineskins for new wine. Here is one easy way to check to see if something is a new wineskin idea: Does it make you squirm? Does it make you squirm because you are being called by

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Jesus to give up your comfortable habit or rut? Are you going to have to consort with people with whom you are uncomfortable or unfamiliar? Are you going to have listen to music you don't like or is new and sounds strange? Are you being called to serve rather than be served? Does it make you squirm because you've never done it this way, and you'd rather not invest a little effort to learn a different way of doing things? Does the new way not fit in with what you experienced at camp or at a retreat or at some other high-powered church?

### **How do we gratefully release the old ways and expectantly encourage the new in order to accomplish our calling?**

- *Listen inwardly.* Get in touch with the Center and Source of what really matters in life.
- The New arises from within and is latently waiting: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:19) We begin Lent in just two and a half weeks. I would like all of us to use this Lenten season as a time to listen deeply to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit within our community.
- *“Energy follows attention:”* We need to shift our attention from what we are trying to avoid to what we want to bring into reality.
- Agree to journey together.
- *Suspend Judgment and listen deeply* to one another. Celebrate the old, and anticipate what will emerge. What is God stirring up in our hearts?
- Operate with an *open heart, an open mind, and an open will* to what emerges.
- Welcome what God is raising up. Commit to it as a group.
- Experiment. Have fun. Try things. Create prototypes to try out. Explore the future by doing. Develop a prototype. A prototype explores the future by doing something small, speedy, and spontaneous.

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- Move from the small pixel into the Big Picture. See how these new things are part of God’s Whole.

### **Us**

We are at a crossroads of a sort. We all know it, don’t we? What it means to be a community of faith today is not the same as it meant fifty years ago, let alone twenty, let alone even ten. Yes, we need new wineskins. But here is the thing we overlook when we talk about wineskins: the only purpose of a wineskin is to carry wine. I’ll say it again: the only purpose of a wineskin is to carry wine. The wine we carry is the transforming power of the Path of Jesus. It is the Power of the Gospel. Our task is not to design a better wineskin. Our task is to see that the wine is delivered to the people who need it the most, and to the next generation. And that might not require wineskins at all. And so that means we need to take our focus off of trying to get people inside these wineskins, and take the wine out there in ways we haven’t even thought of yet.

“Keep doing what you’ve always done, and keep thinking the way you’ve always thought?” It’s time we stopped living according to what Jesus never said, and take seriously what he did say.