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CHURCH

Mark 2:18-22  
Parables in Mark  
“Letting Go of the Past”

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One of the more difficult things to do in life is to let go of the past in order to embrace a new future. We humans tend to gravitate toward that with which we are familiar and comfortable, rather than embracing new. A congregant in my last church, who for a number of years was the President of Centralia College, so he was familiar with leading the kind of organization and institution that oftentimes struggles to holding on to the past...he used to tell me: If you have one hand holding the past and one holding the future where you're headed, it's hard to hold onto the present. We need a hand on the present because that's where we are, and we need one on the future because that's where we're headed. We want to let go of the past.

But it can be so difficult to do. Newton's first law is about physics, but it applies to human nature and desire, too: **“An object at rest remains at rest, or if in motion, remains in motion at a constant velocity unless acted on by a net external force” (Newton's First Law of Motion).** Notice the repeated use of the word “remains.” This is where we tend to like to be: remaining where we are, or remaining on the same course. This can be true in our relationships, careers, education, spiritual life, habits, and more.

Jesus has some things to say that are very helpful in our journey of faith. So, as we start a new sermon series looking at some parables Jesus told as recorded in the Gospel of Mark, let's turn to Mark 2:18-22. Before we dive in, I want to confess that today's passage doesn't really contain a parable. A parable is a metaphorical story for something Jesus wants to communicate. In today's passage there's a metaphor...in fact, there are three metaphors...but there's not really a story. So, with that pastoral confessional disclaimer out of the way, let's turn to **Mark 2:18-22...**

So, this seems to be pretty early on in Jesus' ministry. Obviously, the second chapter of Mark, out of 16 chapters is early, though there's nothing insisting we presume the Gospels are presented in exact chronological order. There's a *general* sense of chronological progression – the gospels do start with his birth or the beginning of his public ministry, and they end with his death and

resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances – but a quick comparison of the four Gospel accounts will make it clear that they aren't a strictly chronological presentation. Regardless, Jesus has had enough of a ministry that he has a following. He has some disciples, which perhaps includes the 12, but perhaps inclusive of others as well. The 12 aren't named until chapter 3. So, Jesus' ministry is under way with some healings that we see in chapter 1 and earlier in 2, but it's still on the early side of things.

And some people notice a difference between his disciples and other groups of people who are also Jewish, and it puzzles them. The other two groups are John the Baptist's disciples and the Pharisees' and their disciples. John, as you may know, was a forerunner to Jesus. His ministry was about preparing the way for Jesus. So, through his teaching and proclamations, he developed a following; he had "disciples." But in the end his job was to point them to Jesus. In fact, in the Gospel According to John – which is a different John (Jesus' disciple) than John the Baptist – we read this: **"The next day John [the Baptist] was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, 'Look, the Lamb of God!' When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus"** (John 1:35-37). So, John had his own followers, but his goal was to point them to Jesus, to hand them off to him. So, we've got them here in these verses, apparently fasting.

The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders of the day. Where John was sort of an outlier in the Jewish religious structure and hierarchy, the Pharisees were in control of the hierarchy and structure. **They were all about preserving tradition. And one of the traditions was fasting.** Biblically, there are a few different times of the year when fasting was to occur. A couple of them were full 24-hour fasts, while others were from sunrise to sunset. But the Pharisees had taken this occasional spiritual discipline and turned it into a weekly rule. In fact, twice a week. Luke records for us a parable where Jesus crafts a story where a Pharisee says, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people...I fast twice a week..." Based on this and other historical evidence, scholars conclude that many Pharisees did in fact fast two days per week. They would frequently mark their faces to look deathly (masks, essentially) and mark their clothes so everyone knew they were fasting. It became a show of religiosity, a source of pride, and a "look

how holy I am” kind of attitude. So, we’ve got John’s disciples and the Pharisees and their disciples.

The fact that these two groups are linked together is a bit ironic. It’s like someone coming to a third-party candidate and saying, “Hey I see that the Republicans and the Democrats are both advocating for this same tax package, why aren’t you and your followers?” Since when do Democrats and Republicans think alike, right? **Regardless, some people notice they both maintain the practice, but Jesus’ disciples do not. And so, these people want to know why Jesus’ disciples don’t participate in fasting.**

Jesus responds with a metaphor that, like I said, isn’t really a parable. It’s a metaphor built around a wedding. At a wedding in their day, the bride and groom did not take off on a honeymoon cruise or trip to Hawaii the day after the wedding. In fact, a honeymoon as we know it would be completely foreign to them. Their tradition was to stick around as newlyweds for the next week and celebrate their marriage with family and friends. We have a wedding ceremony and reception that all told lasts maybe 4 hours; for them it was a weeklong event. **And Jesus is asking the rhetorical question, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?”** In other words: how can the guests not eat at a wedding banquet?

Now, he puts the emphasis on the “bridegroom”, which might seem odd to mention only the guy, but it’s a metaphor for himself. Jesus is the groom, and he specifically wants to highlight that it is his presence that is the reason why they don’t fast. Jesus is with them now, in other words. So, no fasting. In fact, the wedding metaphor stands in stark contrast to the somber and solemn fasting rituals of the Pharisees. A wedding is full of joy! A wedding is a time to party and celebrate. It is no time for fasting. And so, because of Jesus’ presence, which is like being at a wedding party, his disciples don’t fast.

Notice, **Jesus doesn’t say to abolish the practice.** In fact, he took a famous 40-day fast just before beginning his public ministry. So, fasting for a day, or taking a longer fast from a particular habit or ritual we may have in our life is fine. For instance, during the weeks leading up to Easter, which is the season of Lent, it is common for Christians to take a fast from something in their

lives as a way of making room for more of God, and reminding us of our need for and dependence upon him. Jesus says that there will be a time for fasting, when the bridegroom – again, a metaphor for himself – is taken away. In essence, Jesus is foreshadowing his death. *That* is a day of solemnity and fasting, and is why we do it in Lent, as we lead up to his death, and then on the following Sunday we celebrate the resurrection with great joy and acknowledge that Jesus is alive and is in fact still with us by the power of his Holy Spirit.

So, it's a matter of timing. There are times to fast, and there are times not to fast. And at that moment, as Jesus is there with them leading and teaching his disciples, that is not the time to fast. It's a time to celebrate, to have joy like you would at a wedding.

Then he continues his answer with a couple of metaphors that take things a step further. No one would put an unshrunk patch of cloth on an old garment, because the patch will shrink and tear from the old garment. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins because, like a new patch on old clothes, the new wine and old wineskins are not compatible with one another. The wineskins will burst, and the wine ends up on the ground. Both are ruined.

**The point of these metaphors is that the old religious structures are not suitable for containing the new gospel message that Jesus is bringing.** So, the Pharisees' tradition of fasting twice a week is a religious box that can't contain Jesus. Based on Jesus' life and ministry this is just one example of many that could have been raised up such as rules they had developed about keeping the Sabbath, food purity laws, and more. Those old religious structures that they had developed over time are not suitable for containing the new gospel message that Jesus is bringing. You can't just stitch Jesus or the Gospel message onto the fabric of the old systems. You can't pour Jesus into the old containers of religion. As one author put it in summarizing Jesus' teaching, **“Neither patchwork on old systems nor new content in old structures is possible”** (David McKenna, *The Preacher's Commentary: Mark*).

So, what Jesus is saying here about fasting – but then extends it to other traditions, habits, and structures, and so forth – is that when we are a disciple of Jesus, the old ways of our living – whether that’s religious stuff we used to adhere to including other religions, or agnostic or atheistic beliefs, or whether it’s values we have adhered to previously such as a me-first approach to life or materialism, or lifestyle choices and behaviors that don’t align with Scripture, and so forth: **These kinds of things can’t be held onto and just have Jesus stitched onto them or poured into them as if they are the container in which we fit Jesus.**

Their old religious practices, the way that they practiced and organized and structured their faith, simply weren’t sufficient for discipleship to Jesus. Jesus doesn’t fit into that stuff. That’s backwards. We take that stuff and shape them to Jesus. Jesus is the foundation, in other words, and we build our lives, and our faith practices, on Him, not the other way around. We start with Jesus – he’s not just a patch stuck onto an old piece of clothing. He can give us a whole new wardrobe. He’s not just the new wine, he gives us new wineskins...new structures to hold the new thing he’s doing in our lives as represented by that wine.

If we apply this to our very lives, in essence what he’s saying is that he makes us new, which I think is particularly clear in the wine and wineskins metaphor: He makes us a new vessel into which he is poured. Our whole lives are reset, not just our religious practices like fasting. That’s what he’s saying here. So, this applies to all of who we are, whenever and wherever we may be: our places of work, at school, in the arts and music things we attend or participate in, our recreational activities, and all kinds of other stuff we do in life. Jesus is saying that we can’t just tack him onto those things and call it good. They aren’t built to have him stitched onto, or poured into, to contain him. They aren’t sufficient, and Jesus supersedes it all.

And so it’s not that all that stuff has to go away. Again, Jesus didn’t abolish fasting. But he’s saying he’s more important than the fasting is. **He’s more important than our religious structures and practices – let alone other facets of life that we might not think of as “religious.”** He’s more important than our allegiance to the Mariners or the Huskies, or our love of

the outdoors or art or music or our jobs, money, our homes, our possessions, or our relationships or our politics...He's more important than this stuff. We need not abolish them, but we *do* need to keep them in the proper order in relationship to Jesus: and all of it is in line somewhere behind Jesus. He is the head of the line and impacts everything that comes after, when we properly find our identity in him. Jesus impacts it all. He fills it all. He covers it all. He's the foundation for it all. There's not one square inch of life, not one second of time, not one relationship you have, that Jesus doesn't say "it belongs to me." It all does...and if we try to live life as disciples of Jesus in any other fashion, then we're just sort of stitching him onto the pre-existing fabric of our lives.

So, where are you maybe trying to just stitch Jesus onto an old part of your life, rather than letting him give you a whole new cloth? Where are you trying to pour him into some facet of your life and contain him there, rather than giving you a whole new wineskin...a whole new way of being and living that is adequate to who he is? **What part of your identity and your life is still operating in a position above, or apart from, your identity in Christ?** Might be an old attitude we have toward another person, it could be an old value that we're holding onto, it could be an old religious practice like we see in this passage.

Let go of the old way of approaching these things, and allow Jesus to be present there and re-shape it. Let him shape how you view these different aspects of your life, looking at them through the lens of the cross and the empty tomb, approaching them as places where Jesus can operate. And see if he doesn't do something new there in you and through you. Because holding onto the old things we identified with and trying to just tack Jesus on isn't really a life with Jesus as Lord. When we try and just stick him on like that, it wrecks the old and it wrecks what Jesus gives us. The new patch and the new wine get ruined. Instead, hold onto Jesus here and now, today, and keep holding onto him as he leads you into the future. Let's pray...Amen.