

“Teaching and Healing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 12, 2019

First Sunday of Epiphany

Mark 2:1-22

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During our study of Mark’s gospel, we will get to know his writing style: his rapid pace of storytelling and economy of words. Before we reach today’s reading from the second chapter of Mark, let’s look back and see all that happened in the first: the gospel opens with our introduction to John the baptizer, and Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. He then spends forty days of temptation in the wilderness. Upon returning, Jesus calls his first disciples, then begins healing many people, including one man with an unclean spirit and another suffering from leprosy.

This brings us to today’s first reading, where we hear the story of the amazing faith of a paralytic’s friends, who are undeterred by the large crowds around Jesus. They could have easily given up, but instead they find a new way to help him, climbing up on the roof and cutting a hole to lower him down to Jesus in order to be healed.

Upon seeing the great faith of the man’s friends, Jesus declares his sins forgiven. While this does not bring the physical healing that would allow him to walk, it causes the scribes who are in attendance to wonder how Jesus could do this; is it not blasphemy? Perceiving that these concerns are in their minds, Jesus heals the man, telling him to take up his mat and go home; all to show that he does have the authority to declare sins forgiven.

Next, Jesus goes out and calls Levi – known also as Matthew – a tax collector, to be one of his disciples. While eating at Levi’s home, Jesus is confronted by the scribes who again question his judgement, asking why he would eat with sinners. “Those who are well have no need of a physician,” Jesus responds, “but those who are sick.” (v. 17)

The conversation then turns in another direction, as Jesus is asked why John’s disciples – like the Pharisees themselves – practice fasting, while Jesus’ disciples do not. Jesus responds with three short parables as teaching lessons about what has been and what will be; about the old and the new. These are the stories of

the bridegroom, of the un-shrunken patch, and of the new wineskins. Working backwards, we may find that the wisdom within these parables at the end of the reading have something important to teach us about healing that took place at the start.

It is not appropriate, Jesus says, for guests to fast while they are with the bridegroom; in other words, during the celebration of the wedding. This does not say that fasting in of itself is wrong; only that there will be plenty of time to do that later. But things are different when we are in Jesus' presence. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with trying to patch an old cloak, but if you are going to do it, don't use an un-shrunken piece of cloth that will tear and destroy the old cloak. And in the same way, putting new wine into an old wineskin will cause it to burst and the wine will be spilled and the wineskin destroyed.

One of constant points of contention between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees is the difference between the old and the new; time-honored traditions and uncharted ways. Jesus is not claiming that the old does not have value; that it needs to be scrapped in order to make way for the new. On the contrary, he seems genuinely concerned about the old cloak and seasoned wineskin; they are to be preserved and not destroyed. He is not saying that the old is bad while the new is good. And even fasting has its proper time and place.

This being the case, we would be doing a disservice to Jesus' words presented to us here by Mark if we used them to argue for abandoning old traditions or expressions of faith as "old wineskins." Of course, there may be other reasons that a particular tradition, practice, prayer or song is not faithful or fitting for today; but that is a different question. The point is: inherited things are not necessarily bad things just because they are old things, well-used or worn. Instead, Jesus would warn us that old ways and new ways sometimes don't mesh and can be mutually destructive. Therefore, how and when they will be brought together entails thought and care.¹

Jesus did not come to eliminate the Jewish tradition as he knew it; as he learned it as a boy and practiced it throughout his life. And yet, he was well-aware that the new era that began with his coming and that was made known through his teaching and healing would inevitably come into conflict with some of the customs and practices of his faith. Jesus said that he came "to call not the righteous, but

¹ Angela Hancock from *WorkingPreacher.com*

sinner.” (v. 17) This may well mean that those already steeped in faith – the old cloaks and wineskins among him – had no need for something new; and that mixing in the new with the old would have done more harm than good.

We live in a largely disposable society where fewer and fewer things are considered to be worth repairing when replacements are readily available. Maybe Jesus’ teaching today can help us to remember that some things – like an old cloak – are worth the effort to keep; if the repairs are done right; and that other things – like the old wineskin – still have their place, as long as we take care to use them in the proper way. And while this may be true of material things, it also applies to spiritual things: those traditions and practices that have served us and the generations that have gone before us well.

Many of the debates and differences that exist in the Christian church today are seen as choices between tradition and innovation; old and new. Do we gather in sanctuaries or school auditoriums; do we use hymnals or projection screens; robes or blue jeans; organ and piano or drums and guitars? There seem to be as many expressions of church as we can possibly imagine; it seems that God is constantly asking us to discern if it’s appropriate to use the un-shrunk patch or the old one; the worn and weathered wineskin or a new one.

As I said earlier, this is a passage that calls us to work backwards. Having heard Jesus give credence to both old ways and new; and proclaim that he has come for the sick and not for those who are well; we can now take another look at the story of the paralytic man that is healed. Again, what Jesus takes notice of first is the faithful persistence of the paralytic’s friends; that they are not deterred by the crowds, but instead find a new way to reach Jesus in the name of healing. To me, this speaks highly of the community of faith which prays, advocates, and works for the healing and wholeness of its members. This is our mutual calling; and the ways that we look after and support one another does not go unnoticed by God.

What it also says to me is that our prayerful longings for healing need not only involve a physical transformation, but also leads to fuller inclusion into the community. After his healing, the paralytic man is told to return to this home; to rejoin his family from whom he quite possibly had been estranged or at least felt as if he was nothing more than a burden. But now, the faith of his friends and the healing mercy of Jesus allowed him to go back; to re-claim a more whole and complete life with his loved ones. This can be our hope and prayer as well for so many who are isolated or estranged from their family members, neighbors, and

friends; whether the root cause was a physical illness or a different cause: that a fuller, more deeply connected future can become reality.

An interesting detail that Mark includes in this story is the prominence of the paralytic's mat. We are told that he is lowered through the roof to Jesus while on his mat. Then, during his conversation with the Jewish scribes, Jesus asks, "which is easier, to say 'your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'stand up and take your mat and walk?'" (v. 9) Jesus then pronounces the healing by saying, "stand up, take your mat and go to your home." (v. 11) Mark then tells us, "He stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them." (v. 12)

It seems like a strange thing for Jesus to tell a healed person to do: *be sure to take your sickbed with you; thank you*. Why would this man want that particular souvenir? It would be like finally getting your cast off and having your doctor insist that you lug the overripe shell home with you. Why does the mat have such a big role in this story?

Likely, the paralyzed man's life is never the same after that day when he met Jesus from his mat and walked out on his own two feet. He had to be carried at the beginning of the story, but now he carries his mat away. The old life has gone and a new life has begun. But, he would not forget – nor would he be expected to – what he had gone through. His mat would be a part of his lifelong testimony that the old and the new, the past and the future – though different – are certainly related.

Now, of course, it is stories like these from the gospel of Mark – stories of healing and teaching – that to us, now, are old. They have been read and told so many times. They are like a threadbare cloak, like a seasoned wineskin, like a well-used mat. Old, and yet, so full of rich, new possibility. Thanks be to God. Amen.