

Something New
By Jason Huff
Micah 6:1-4, 6-8; Hebrews 10:1-5, 9-24; Luke 5:27-39

Our third reading this week comes from Luke 5:27-39. Last week, we discussed how Jesus healed a leper and a paralytic only to find Himself confronted for the first time by the religious watchdogs called the Pharisees. Today's reading happens soon afterwards, which is where we pick up the story. Luke writes, "After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." They said to him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking." Jesus answered, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast." He told them this parable: "No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'"

So what's your preference – old or new? It seems to be something that all of us have an opinion about. Often it seems to do with when we grew up...the things we knew as a child and as a teenager are the things that are comfortable. I was always surprised as a kid at how my grandparents' generation used to love watching Lawrence Welk on TV. It seemed so old! And yet now I find myself often tuning into the station with the greatest hits of the 1980s...the songs I grew up on. Old and new are often relative terms. When I first discovered The Beatles, it was like a whole new world of music had opened up to me, even though the Beatles disbanded four years before I was born. Sometimes what was old is made new again. How many movie remakes do we see in a year? Do we really need a new and updated version of King Kong or the latest horror movie? Yet we have a taste for taking the old and trying to make it fresh and different, yet still clinging to the things we liked about it the first time around.

Me, I like new stuff. I love the smell of a new car. Whenever I go to one of those full service car washes and they ask me what kind of air freshener I'd like, I always go for new car smell. Maybe it's just the thought of the newness that's kind of exciting. And I love ripping into the instruction manual of any electronic gizmo I happen to find. I might not be able to buy much electronic stuff, but I could talk to you for hours about high-definition TVs and DVD players. You have a computer geek for a pastor...that's just the way it is. But even for those of us who love new stuff, sometimes the new isn't so good. How many of us had flashing clocks on our VCRs since the day we bought them? How many of us still remember having to stand up and turn the rotary dial on the television set to get a picture? It might be nice to channel surf these days, but what good are 150 channels if there's nothing on but reality shows and reruns?

The Bible has the same kind of back and forth over the old and the new. For a long time, since the time of Moses, seventy elders helped to counsel those who governed Israel. One of the Ten Commandments is to honor your mother and father. Leviticus tells us that showing respect to those who are older among us ultimately shows our respect for God. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites are told to forsake the new and false religions of their neighbors and return to the law of God. But on the other hand, the Bible celebrates newness as well. Six different passages tell us that we should sing a new song to the Lord. Against the common modern thought that wine has to age to be good, the Bible sings the praises of new wine and states that a harvest of grain and new wine is to be celebrated as a gift from the Lord. And in Isaiah 43, we hear prophecy how God is doing a new thing, how He will send His servant into the world so that the world will hear and believe and know God and be saved through Him.

It's that struggle between the old and new that frames our study today. The passage begins with Jesus coming by Levi's tax booth, where he would have been assessing tolls on goods coming into the city. Now we've talked in the past about how tax collectors in Jesus' day were reviled as traitors to the Jewish nation who stole from their fellow countrymen to line their pockets and the pockets of Rome. Levi would have been seen as a huge sinner by the Pharisees. But Jesus offers him a new life, and Levi takes Jesus up on it. He quits his job and leaves the booth right that minute. And while the text doesn't spell it out for us, Levi has been touched by Jesus and has a huge change of heart. He takes the earnings he's made, and rather than spending it on himself, rather than bowing to greed, he gives a huge celebration for Jesus. He invites all his old buddies from work to come, and a huge crowd of people is there for this banquet. All of them are dining with him at this great feast. Levi has organized this huge shindig to honor Jesus and to give his friends the opportunity to know this man who has changed his life. And change it will, as Levi – also known as Matthew – becomes one of Jesus' close disciples and writes the Gospel that bears his name.

It appears that this gala was so big that a large number of people were invited. It would have proper hospitality to have invited the Pharisees who had traveled from as far away as Jerusalem to see Jesus to be a part of the festivities. It's very likely that they came, expecting that they would have the honored seats at the table beside Jesus, as visiting religious authorities. They look in at this party, and they are shocked. Their seats are not right beside Jesus. In fact, Jesus is sitting with some of the very people who collected taxes from them as they entered the city themselves! They are incensed. These people that Jesus is with, they don't follow the rules that make certain that the Law of Moses is never broken! What is going on?? Of course, they don't go right to the guest of honor about it. Instead, they grab a few of Jesus' disciples as they stand by with a serving tray. "Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?" they ask. The implication is clear...these people aren't worth your time. They're lowlifes. Not worth the time of day. No honorable person would ever hang out with them.

But Jesus gets wind of the conversation and He gives the Pharisees what for. He says, "A doctor looks after the sick...not the well. I've come to call sinners to repentance, not the righteous." At first, it seems like a reasonable response...oh, well, Jesus is here to help those poor wretches get straightened out with God, good for Him. But then they realize, hey, we were invited to this party too. Is he saying that we're sinners too? We're the Pharisees! We know who God is! We follow the law and the tradition! Who does He think He is?

In their anger, they confront Him head on, and this time they attack His disciples. They say, “Well, John’s disciples fast, and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don’t.” Now fasting was a common party of Jewish piety. We know that the Pharisees fasted twice a week. In fact, the Bible is full of stories where believers fasted in order to get closer to God and to repent of sin. Christians eventually did it as well. But the Pharisees are trying to prove that they are more holy than Jesus’ disciples. They are fighting against Jesus’ subtle assertion that they might be in need of repentance.

But once again, Jesus schools them. Why *would* they fast, He asks? He makes an analogy. To ask the disciples to fast would be like asking wedding guests to fast when the bridal party has arrived. It’s crazy. In fact, it’s rude. This is a time of celebration! The groom has arrived! The disciples couldn’t be any closer to God – they spent every day in the presence of God the Son! For them, fasting simply made no sense. Jesus says sure, eventually, my disciples will fast when I am no longer with them. They’ll want to fast so that they know my presence with them then like they know it now. But fasting for the sake of fasting alone doesn’t mean anything.

But that was the key problem for the Pharisees...they liked being known as religious people. They paraded it around. They wanted people to know that they fasted. They wanted people to know that they had God’s ear because they did the right rituals. And those rituals weren’t based on the Law of Moses but on their own religious tradition. Now traditions can be good. Traditions can point us towards good things. The Bible never says that we are supposed to celebrate Christmas or Easter, but we do it because of tradition...and those traditions help us to set aside time in the year to remember Christ’s time among us. In a couple of weeks, Catha and I are going downtown to see “Fiddler on the Roof.” It’s my favorite musical bar none. And I love it when Tevye gets out there in the opening number and sings about how their whole village is able to function and everybody knows his or her place because of one thing. [*singing*] Tradition! [*end singing!*] Traditions sometimes help us make sense of our world. But what had happened was that the traditions of the Pharisees had become their own law. They didn’t want a messiah who didn’t walk like them and talk like them and act like them. They believed they were the truly righteous people, and so they had a problem with Jesus being different and acting different and reaching out to people who needed to change their ways.

So Jesus tells them a couple of parables. He says, “Nobody takes a new coat and cuts it up and uses it to patch an old coat. Then the new coat is ruined and the patch won’t match the old coat.” Now my friend Scotty in the back already fixed up my old coat for me when I moved to Michigan, and I bet she could fix up anything given enough time and materials from Joann Fabrics. But why would anybody buy a new coat just to fix an old one? It doesn’t make sense! In the same way, Jesus says, “Nobody puts new wine into old wineskins.” That’s because old wineskins are brittle. The process of fermentation releases different gasses into the wineskin that ages it too, so a wineskin can only go through the process once. If you put new wine into an old wineskin, then eventually it’s going to be like a shaken bottle of soda with a loose cap...and all you’ll have left is a mess.

But what do these parables mean? Jesus is saying that He is starting a new way of being in relationship with God. It's not a way based on tradition or being good or following a law. His way is to call people to repentance and to live life with them in holiness. His way isn't worried about external signs of piety like fasting. His way is concerned about the condition of human hearts. And the two methods aren't going to combine. As we heard from the books of Hebrews this morning, the old law didn't fix anything, not permanently. The sacrifices made under the old law didn't make anyone perfect, and they couldn't cleanse anybody of sins. Now Jesus followed the law perfectly; He never sinned. He followed it perfectly so He could be the perfect sacrifice. As our reading from Hebrews said, we can enter the Most Holy Place – the place where God Himself can be found – through the blood of Jesus. Christ's sacrifice is the new and living way that we can approach God. Through Christ, God did something radically new. He gave us a way to come close to Him, through faith in His Son. We don't have to fast to make sure our prayers are heard. We don't have to worry whether or not God loves us when we sin. We know that God loves us and wants to cleanse us from sin.

Does that mean that the law is totally bad? Does it mean we should ignore the Old Testament? Absolutely not! The law teaches us what is good and right and holy. We need to know what it says so that we can understand the ways of God. But now, the law is not a hatchet waiting to cut us off from God at the first sign of disobedience. Now, the law guides us in knowing how to put our faith into practice. It works alongside the Holy Spirit to direct us in God's ways. But we also need God's new way. We need God's salvation through Christ's sacrifice for us. God's grace on the cross reframes the old law and makes it new again by putting that law in our hearts.

Of course, Jesus knew that some people like the Pharisees would reject anything new. As He says, "No one drinking old wine wants the new because they say, the old is better." Now this parable sounds a little off because we have this idea that wine only gets better with age. Did you know that it's not actually true? Wine experts say that only about 7% of the wine made in the world has any hope of tasting better after a few months of fermentation. In fact, it turns out that many wines are more likely to get worse with age! The reason that wine gets more expensive as it ages is not because it tastes better but because it becomes more rare. The point that Jesus is trying to make is that the Pharisees have no interest in God doing a new thing. The Pharisees are drunk on their power, drunk on their authority, drunk on the thought that they and they alone are really holy before God. They don't want the new wine of Christ. They don't want to be associated with those who are beneath them socially. They have no interest in rescuing the lost and the hopeless. Jesus is trying to get them to realize that He is the real deal! He is the hope of the world! But they are too interested in their tradition to realize that God is with them, right under their noses, in Jesus Christ.

What does this story mean for us? First, it reminds us that embracing the lost and the lonely and the sinners of the world is a new thing, not accepted by all people. If we take a moment to get to know the hard-living woman who works on the other side of the cubicle or the guy with all the tattoos, people will start to wonder what's going on. Most people think that it's a great idea to help the needy, but they don't want to get their hands dirty. That's the way of the world.

But Christ calls us to something new and different. Last week, God went to the outcasts. This week, He goes right to the sinners. He ate and drank with them. He became a part of their lives. And He encourages us to do the same. The whole point of Christ coming to the world was for God to embrace us, to love us, and to offer us salvation. The Pharisees wanted to be the “in” group. But that’s not our call. There is no “in” group, no cliques, just one church, bruised and broken by the world but healed by the loving touch of our savior.

This passage encourages us to look at things in a new way so that we can reach out. We aren’t called to follow tradition for tradition’s sake but to follow God wherever He’s leading. For example, we’ve been learning some new music over the past six months, and more new music is on the way. Now it’s pointless for us to do new music just for its own sake too. The hymns the church sang for years have lots of good theology in them, and we can learn a lot from them. Sometimes our new songs aren’t the most deeply theological; they’re songs to help build young Christians rather than mature believers. But singing a new song and doing a new thing can help us relate to new people. It helps our youth understand that Christianity is for them too; it’s ancient but also ever new. That’s why we did “Come Thou Fount” this morning as our opening song. It’s a great old hymn with a new sound to it. In Christ, the old and new can come together, as the new invigorates the old and makes it new all over again.

We can also start looking for God’s new directions in our future as a church. What new ministry can you start? What new idea do we need to pursue? What new missionary work do we need to support? Our God is alive and well and doing a new thing in our midst! In the last few months, we’ve welcomed back old friends into the church and made some new ones. God is doing something new! Are we ready for it? Are we willing to act on it? If we aren’t looking for God’s direction, we’ll never see it. But if we are praying and seeking God’s will, He *will* make it clear to us. Let’s be open to the Spirit’s leading. Let’s be listening for His guidance as to what we should do next. Because I know there are great surprises on the horizon for us if we wait patiently and listen attentively and are willing to do God’s new thing.

So which is better...new or old? Thankfully, that’s not a question we have to answer this morning. Our God is timeless. He is older than creation itself, yet He makes everything new. He stands outside of time and shapes time perfectly so that His will is accomplished. We can live joyful lives knowing that if we respect God’s ancient ways and look forward to the new things He is doing in our lives and our church, we will be at His table, sitting with Him and feasting with Him and learning His ways. Let’s pray.