

**St. Andrew's Church - July 25, 2010**

Sermon "New Wine - Old wineskins" - The Rev. Doug Kendall

Lord God, may the words of my mouth,  
and the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts,  
be acceptable to you, our God and our source of wisdom.  
AMEN.

In our bible reading today,  
people seem to be coming out of the woodwork just to ask Jesus questions.  
Jesus is doing something new, and it is confusing the people.  
They have never seen anyone quite like Jesus before,  
and they have lots of questions.  
The scribes have questions  
because Jesus does not seem to be following the same rules  
as their bosses the Pharisees.  
Others have questions, because Jesus is not following the same rules  
as the disciples of John the Baptist either.  
If Jesus isn't like the Pharisees or John the Baptist,  
who is he like?  
Jesus does not fit into the mental framework they have of their religion,  
the narrow view they have of the Jewish faith,  
or the way they understand God.

The passage today begins with Jesus doing something radical,  
calling Levi to follow him and be a disciple.  
Levi was a tax collector, which as most of us know,  
was not the most popular profession in ancient Israel.  
You see it was personal back then.  
You paid your taxes directly to an individual in the community,  
most of the time a fellow Israelite.  
That individual was generally very rich,  
because he was entitled to take a percentage of the tax money.  
As you can imagine, this would not make him a particularly popular person.

This was the case with Levi.  
He was not the most loved person in town,  
and yet as Jesus walked past his tax collecting booth,  
he simply looked at Levi and said,  
"Follow me"  
Levi dropped everything and followed Jesus.  
The next thing we know, Jesus is having a meal at Levi's house.

In Jewish law and tradition, food is very important.  
Not only what you eat and how it is prepared,  
but with whom one shared a meal was extremely important.  
To eat with an outcast would make you an outcast.  
To eat with an entire crowd of outcasts was unthinkable.  
Again Jesus was doing something new,  
something unthinkable according to the old ways and traditions.  
It did not fit into what they thought of as "Jewish".

That is what prompted the first question of Jesus and his disciples.

Picture if you will, a Mediterranean night.  
A warm dry wind is blowing in from the desert.  
Eating inside the house with a large crowd of people was out of the question,  
so Levi and his friends and Jesus and his disciples

were eating in an outside garden.  
They would be in plain view of all the passers by,  
Sort of like eating out on a restaurant patio in the market,  
Or having a Barbeque on your front lawn  
instead of in the back yard behind your privacy fence.

While all the respectable people were walking by,  
Jesus was having table fellowship with all manner of outcasts and sinners.

Picture now a group of Scribes going by.  
As they are walking by that night they see Jesus and his disciples  
enjoying a great dinner.  
The wine is flowing freely,  
the smell of cooked meat and fresh bread is filling the air,  
and the tables are just covered in spicy foods,  
and everyone is enjoying themselves wonderfully.

The Scribes do not want to talk to Jesus.  
They wander over to the low garden wall,  
and get the attention of one of his disciples.  
They try to whisper quietly at first.  
*"Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*  
Unfortunately despite their efforts,  
Jesus has heard their smug self-righteous question,  
and **he** wants to answer.

***"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 scribes, somewhat surprised with Jesus response,  
and not wanting to get into a theological confrontation  
with this popular teacher,  
make their way off into the distance a little way.  
They stand there and talk amongst themselves,  
far enough away to be unobtrusive,  
and yet close enough to hear whatever is going to happen next.

Soon a group of friends of John the Baptist walk by.  
They know better than to try to talk *around* Jesus,  
so they wander over to the wall and call out.  
***"Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast,  
but your disciples do not fast?"***

I can picture the scribes leaning a little closer wanting to hear Jesus response.  
You see, they all suspect that Jesus is coming  
preaching some more liberal path of Judaism,  
probably not even Judaism really  
with all this talk about freedom and not following the laws.

Eating with people who are outcasts.  
What kind of new religion is this that Jesus is teaching?  
They can eat with whomever they like,  
they never seem to have to fast..  
Everyone is listening for Jesus answer.  
The crowd of outcasts at the dinner are quiet now too,  
and the scribes as well as John's friends are listening.

***"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.  
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."***

O.K. so maybe it wasn't as clear as Jesus hoped.  
The scribes and the friends of John the Baptist walk away scratching their heads.  
The disciples are looking at each other and nodding knowingly,  
but they really have no idea either.  
The rest of the outcasts are wondering if they are supposed to be the new wine,  
or the old wine, or the burst wineskins  
that can not handle the new teachings.  
What is this about patching clothes and making wine?

What was Jesus saying?  
It has something to do with the old ways of doing things and the new ways.  
Something to do with God's people's ability to change and accept the new.  
It has to do with the way we see God, and Jesus, and the church,  
and each other as well.

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Jesus did not come to bring a new religious system, to begin a new religion.  
Jesus was Jewish.  
He spent his whole life going to synagogue,  
and teaching in the rabbinic tradition.  
Trying to show people that God was not so worried about all the rules,  
God was more worried about what was in people's hearts.  
God didn't care so much whether people did everything just right,  
he was more concerned with love and justice and peace,  
and caring for each other and caring for those in our society  
who are ignored.

It wasn't until about 35 years after Jesus death and resurrection,  
that there was something known as a Christian.  
Up until that point they were all known as Jews  
following the new teachings of a man named Jesus,  
a man who was a unique gift from God, who was God.  
This proved to be too much for the framework of Jewish thought,  
the idea of Jesus being God crossed the line into polytheism,  
the idea that there was more than one God.  
But this new teaching ultimately  
was incompatible with the old ways of doing things,  
and eventually the Christian church was born  
out of the womb of a Jewish mother.

***"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."***

Martin Luther the 16<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic priest  
who ended up beginning the reformation in Germany  
had no intention of starting a new religion.

All he wanted to do was teach a new perspective on the bible,  
and on the Christian Church.  
A new way of doing things that put ultimate authority on God  
and not on human beings and traditions,  
and allowed for the idea that the Holy Spirit  
might just be able to speak to, and work through ordinary people.  
It was a new way of seeing the world, God, Jesus and each other.  
But this new teaching ultimately was incompatible  
with the old ways of doing things,  
and the reformed Christian church took it's first tentative step  
out of the tender arms of Roman Catholicism.

***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."***

This Scripture reading haunts me every time I think  
about new things in the church.  
It appears to be saying that it is impossible to blend the old with the new.  
A new patch will only tear away from the old cloth,  
trying to put new wine into old wineskins  
will only end up bursting the old wine skins, and wasting the new wine.

Anything new will only tear apart and destroy what is already there.  
Is the idea of bringing contemporary music and instruments  
into an established church like putting new wine in an old wineskin?  
Is the idea of renovating the church and building an addition  
like putting a new patch on an old coat?  
Is the ultimate result a broken wineskin and spilled wine,  
a torn and useless coat?  
Is the ultimate result a torn and broken church?

Some ministers who are into church growth and the new way of doing things  
would say the only way to grow is to do away with the old,  
move away from these old buildings that look like churches,  
with the pews and the stained glass windows and the organs,  
it is time to do away with all that is old,  
and boldly do only what is new.  
What we have done for centuries is no longer relevant,  
is only a relic of the past,  
and is incapable of becoming something new.  
To blend the old with the new will only tear apart the old.  
Is that what Jesus was talking about?  
Does the new have to replace the old?

These parables Jesus told  
were a warning for all those who were willing to listen.  
Our understanding of God and the church is always too small and too limited.  
If the scribes and others could not see that God loved even the outcasts,  
then their understanding of God could not withstand Jesus new teaching.  
Their understanding of the church and God,  
was like the old cloak.  
Jesus teaching of love and acceptance would be like a new patch on that old coat.  
It would not hold,  
and eventually would leave a bigger tear than was originally there.  
Likewise, if their understanding of God and their religion  
was as brittle as an old wine skin,

then the new teaching about God's grace, as it grew inside them,  
would bust the old wineskin to pieces.

How brittle is our understanding of God and Jesus  
and the unpredictable nature of the Holy Spirit?  
How brittle is our understanding of what the church should be and will be?  
Is there room for the outcasts and sinners,  
For those who are theologically traditional  
and those for whom the old understandings of church no longer work?  
Is there room for those who would like to have more contemporary music,  
And those who would like keep the old hymns from the brown book?  
How flexible is our understanding of Christ's church?

In the year (almost) that I have been here,  
I have been amazed by how flexible we are as a congregation  
here at St. Andrew's.  
We sing a variety of hymns and different songs.  
Our children are welcome in worship, and at communion,  
And offer their gifts of music and reading scripture.  
When I mentioned doing communion a different way the response was,  
"Sure, lets give it a try!"  
When we decided to do the Annual meeting a different way the response was,  
"Sure lets give it a try!"  
When I offered to put on lulu lemon yoga pants and do liturgical dance in worship,  
The response was, "No thanks, not yet anyway."

We are a community of faith that worships together,  
We work together,  
we accept each other with our strengths and our weaknesses,  
with our similarities and our difference,  
We care for each other,  
And we certainly eat together.

But we always need to be asking ourselves,  
"Is our understanding of what church is still too limited?"  
Are we doing all we can to reach the people who are not able to see God  
in our way of doing church?  
We have found God here in this gathering of people we call church,  
how do we show others what we have found?  
These are big questions...  
and I suspect it is when we stop asking these questions,  
that we become brittle and fragile, and unable to accept what is new.  
May God give us the strength and the wisdom to continue to change and grow  
As the needs of the world around us change.

I Jesus name, AMEN