

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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What's New?

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Introduction

Good morning, church. What's new?

The last time I was standing in this spot to preach, we were one week away from welcoming our new Senior Pastor. Eastertide is meant to be a season of newness, and we not only preached it this year; we embodied it.

So, what's new?

This morning's Scripture challenges and encourages us to ask that question in our individual lives and our communal life, together. Because God is a Living God. Our faith is a living faith. And the only thing constant in life is change.

We pick up the lectionary text today—sort of. The lectionary is a three-year cycle of Scripture readings that help us to walk through the seasons of the church calendar. It helps us to get a good variety of stories and teachings to shape our faith. But sometimes the lectionary readings skip over things for the sake of brevity or to make a specific point. This morning's lectionary reading skips right over what I think is the main point.

So, we're going to read the omitted part, rebels we are. Before we listen to God's Word through the Gospel of Matthew, will you please join me in prayer?

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God,

You speak to us in ways we are not always ready to hear:
Through prophets, through children, through unexpected
strangers, and even in the Scriptures, where we expect to hear
you, but still, you stretch us.

Open our hearts to listen this day.

Give us courage to change our minds,

Give us hope enough in the future that we stop yearning only
for the past.

We pray in the name of the risen Christ,
and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 9:9-17

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting [reclining] with Jesus and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

14 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

15 And Jesus said to them, “The wedding attendants cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. 16 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. 17 Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are ruined, but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

New Fangled Organs

There's some debate among scholars, but it can be argued that the first church service to include the sound of an organ took place in 670 CE.

Organs were more commonplace in circuses than sanctuaries. They were viewed by some with suspicion, even outrage. It took hundreds of years for organs to become commonplace in places of worship.

Our Reformed tradition, in particular, pushed back hard. John Knox, the Scottish Reformer, spoke with sharpness that the Word of God is the only organ and instrument needed for the church.

Our other favorite John, John Calvin, used the adjective ludicrous to describe worship accompanied by an organ. I can only imagine what the Johns would think of our Bridge worship service.

It's easy to chuckle at the misguided notions of generations passed. It's harder to admit that most of us are also suspicious when "way we do things here" is challenged.

Jesus Was Doing Something New

In first-century Galilean Judaism, the Pharisees had the responsibility of defining the "way we do things here." To please God, we do things like...

Not associate with sinners.

Fast often to be holy.

Remain ritually clean.

Keep the Sabbath.

Go along to get along with Rome.

The status quo becomes the status quo for a reason. It works for those in charge. And those it does not work for? Well, they are the problem.

The sinners, the ones under God's judgment, those who just need to try harder or to accept their lot in life. You can keep things the "way we do them here" when you just push aside those who don't fit in.

Jesus refused to do that.

To be clear, and we need to be in a time of rising antisemitism, this is not about Christianity being better than Judaism. Legalism, fundamentalism, upholding traditions over truly loving people—that is a very human problem, and ironically, a very Christian problem throughout history.

Jesus upended “the way we do things here” throughout Galilee and into Judea and beyond. He pushed and stretched the status quo to its breaking point.

He healed lepers, forgave sins, called fishermen as disciples, challenged accepted interpretations of God's law, and, at the end of the day, relaxed at a table with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus refused to do things the “way we’ve always done them.” And it was irritating. It was threatening.

It was ludicrous to the religious leaders of his time.

How to Expand and Not Burst

Ed and I are preparing for a trip to Sonoma in just a week's time. Perhaps this is why a verse about old and new wine spoke to me this week. I have only a passing understanding of how wine is made in the modern era. To be honest, the picture in my mind is still that classic I Love Lucy episode where Lucy's excursion into grape stomping quickly turns into an all-out wrestling match.

This isn't quite what Jesus was envisioning.

When new wine fermented, the wineskin had to stretch with it. Fresh skin could do that. An old one had already been stretched as far as it could go.

Pour new wine into an old wineskin, and it will burst; both will be lost.

Or think about patching a favorite pair of worn-out jeans. The first time they go into the dryer, the new fabric will pull against the old until the tear is even worse than before.

What in your life—in our life together—has become rigid? What has lost the flexibility to hold new possibilities or surprising movements of the Spirit?

Perhaps it's the tyranny of your calendar. You open your iCal and every moment of everyday is accounted for.

Perhaps it's the conviction that there is only one right way to do things. You'd love help but no one else will do it quite the way you do.

Perhaps it's the expectations we carry about who we are as a church—assumptions about who belongs here, what ministry should look like, or what God can still do among us.

Perhaps the pace of change just feels overwhelming, and you'd rather hold on to what is familiar, even if it no longer serves you.

Like that favorite pair of worn-out pants or those hole-ridden socks, the old feels comfortable simply because it is known. There comes a time when what once served us can no longer carry us forward. The old socks eventually need replacing. The old phone can no longer run the new software. What was once useful reaches its limit.

It is then that Jesus invites us to be renewed. He invites us to become pliable again, open again, able to receive the new life God longs to pour into us.

Because the good news is that old wineskins can be made new. They can be softened, stretched, and prepared to hold new things. And so can we.

This teaching is sandwiched by two stories where Jesus shows us how it's done. So, I offer you this morning two ways to be renewed.

Let Grace Soften You

Number one: Let grace soften you.

We read the call of Matthew, the tax collector. How Jesus then sat at the table with sinners. How he addressed the Pharisees—he came for sinners, not the righteous.

This is where the Johns of the Reformed tradition really get it right.

Nobody earns a seat at Christ's table. We all arrive the same way: By grace.

This ought to soften us to those we would otherwise be quick to judge and reject.

This ought to soften us when we are quick to judge and reject the person we see in the mirror.

God invites us. God invites them. We stand on equal footing in the kingdom.

Whether you fast or feast. Whether you are loud or quiet about your faith. Whether you have much to be forgiven or much to forgive. Whether you are rich or poor, powerful or

humble, privileged or oppressed, straight, gay, black, white, citizen, undocumented, free, imprisoned, bold, meek, wherever you fall on whatever spectrum we have turned into a hierarchy—Christ came for you. Christ loves you. It's all grace.

How could that not soften our hearts toward one another?

And toward ourselves?

Let grace soften you.

Make Room

Number two: Make room.

Immediately following our reading from today, a religious leader comes to Jesus and urges him go with. This man's daughter had just died, but he believes that Jesus can make her live again.

I cannot imagine something more high stakes and urgent. And Jesus goes. But on his way a woman reaches out and touches his cloak. She is not an important person. She had lived with menstrual bleeding for twelve years straight. She had lived unclean, impure, outcast for twelve years. And she reached out to be healed by the Great Physician.

Jesus doesn't walk on, ignoring her.

Jesus doesn't reprimand her for getting in his way.

He stops. He sees her. And he tells her, “Take heart, daughter. Your faith has made you well.”

He makes room. At a time and place where there seems to be no possible flexibility and bandwidth, Jesus makes room. We are coming off the month of May, which has become almost unbearably busy in the lives of families. Everything can feel urgent and important. It can feel impossible to slow the train.

Yet, I don't know if there was a person with more on their potential to-do list than Jesus.

Jesus' life was not balanced. It was not optimized. He did not have a three-year plan before his crucifixion to figure out the highest impact and best ROI.

But he knew what he was here to do. And he knew that he would not do it all.

So, he made room to discern God's voice. He prayed. He retreated. He slowed down enough to see, to listen, to not be hurried and anxious.

I am not preaching this from a place of judgment—I preach it to myself more than anyone. And I am assured that grace still covers us when we are hurried and frantic.

But we know that hurried people reject newness out of hand. We have experienced that anxious systems view change as a threat.

Jesus shows us a different way.

A softer way to walk in the world. A more expansive way to show up in our everyday.

Where is our margin to respond to God surprising us?
Do we have the flexibility to say, “Yes!” when an opportunity reaches out and grabs us?

What’s New?

So, what do you see? What stirring of the Spirit do you sense?
In your life, in this community, “What’s new?”

We’ve accepted the organ, even the drums and guitars.
Church, how is God expanding our hearts to accept all of
God’s children, our tables to include all of Christ’s friends, our
lives to discern all the places the Spirit will call us next?

May we meet “what’s new” with grace to accept and space to
grow. Amen.



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