

New Wine into New Wineskins
Mark 2:18-22

Friends a couple weeks ago I was watching an episode of the Just for Laughs Comedy Festival, and one of the comedians opened his set by complaining about how much he always ends up eating over the holidays and then noting that it's the Christian holidays which are to blame because they always seem to involve so much food.

He then went on to say that he wasn't aware of any Buddhist holidays which involved eating tons and tons of food, but rather that it was his impression was that most of the other world religions tended to fast when it came to religious holidays...not feast and in his opinion that seemed more appropriate for a religious holiday.

Now this comedic criticism strikes a chord with people today. It does seem to be ironic that a religion, which most people expect to promote love, peace, sharing, kindness etc..., appears to boarder on gluttony every time one of its major holidays comes around.

And every in every other major world religion it is more common to abstain from food, and drink on special days than it is to feast.

And because it's very common for people to determine the credibility of a particular religion, or the authenticity of a religious leader based on how their followers act – I got the distinct impression that this comedian had a axe to grind with the Christian faith.

That he was criticizing Christianity for a lacking in spiritual discipline and thus stating that its credibility as a religion was lacking.

And as we walk alongside Jesus this morning in the gospel of Mark we see Jesus handling the same kind of criticism and accusation.

Some people come up to him and say “Jesus...the followers of the Pharisees and John the Baptist fast, how come yours don't?”

Now we don't know what these people really thought about the Pharisees or John the Baptist, neither was very popular with the people.

Because the Pharisees were known for being harsh religious taskmasters, and John the Baptist was warning everyone of impending judgment if they did not repent.

But, for all their lack of popularity and not being loved by the majority of people... they were at least respected for who they were as religious figures, because of their spiritual discipline, and the conduct of their followers. They walked the talk of being religious.

And the people who saw it were impressed by it and it gave what each group stood for and believed in a degree of credibility.

And it still works the same way today right? Many non-Buddhists admire and appreciate Buddhism's emphasis on peace and the sanctity of life. And whether or not Islam is

popular or accepted by our society, we will still give them credit for fasting for the whole month of Ramadan. And

And if we view and evaluate religions in this way, as simply being about discipline, performing prayers or fasting or idealizing things like peace, love or life, well then its easy to understand why most people feel that all religions lead to God.

Because, yes there are similarities among them – even with Christianity.

But while Jesus might look similar to Buddha and Mohammed, and while some of his activities were comparable to those of John the Baptist and the Pharisees in that he traveled around teaching people with close group of followers....

He was very different in that He went around casting out demons, healing diseases, curing the lame, hanging out with sinner and forgiving their sins... this is what Jesus has been up to since we hung out with him last week...oh yes... and his disciples didn't fast!

So this whole outfit couldn't be neatly categorized and put into a typical religious box and that made some people were skeptical about who Jesus was and what exactly he was promoting.

And friends, not much has changed in this respect since that time. There is still an overarching set of expectations which people have as to what it means to be religious. People are still trying to categorize Jesus accordingly and fit him into some religious box and evaluate his authenticity by examining his followers conduct.

Was he a good moral teacher? Then it would be expected that his followers would be exemplary moral people. Was he a prophet, or revolutionary? Then his followers should be up in arms about the injustice that goes on in our world and taking action against it!

Was he someone who was particularly good at connecting with the divine? Then his followers ought to be able to inspire others to do the same.

And so there is no shortage of criticism and accusation today that the followers of Christ do not act as the world expects them to do as religious people.

So how does Jesus respond? Well friends we can certainly learn something from our Lord as we listen to his answer – and notice that Jesus doesn't get caught up in the facts and details of the accusation, He goes straight for the real issue at hand and deals with it. (May the Holy Spirit make us all likewise!)

The real issue here is the “why?” Why do you fast? Why do you do what you do as a religious person?

The Pharisees fasted because they believed that it was a sign of humbling oneself before God, because they believed that it could protect you from evil spirits, because it might convince God to grant you a request, or to renounce yourself and indicate your repentance when you had sinned.

And that was also why John the Baptist fasted, in preparing the way for the Messiah, He called Israel to turn away from their unfaithfulness to God and to prepare themselves, to ready

themselves for the new thing God was going to do for them through the Messiah.

Fasting was part of showing that repentance and readiness and that they believed the Messiah was about to arrive.

So when Jesus is asked why His disciples do not fast – He doesn't go into a technical discussion about the rules around fasting. Instead He takes it as an opportunity to proclaim the truth about the new thing God was doing through Him as the Messiah.

He explains...the reason his disciples don't fast is that they are guests of the Bridegroom.

Not you might be thinking..."Hold on a minute here, haven't we saying that Jesus is the Messiah? What's with calling himself a bridegroom now?"

Well friends, it's a prophetic metaphor from Isaiah that Jesus uses so that the people he was speaking to would understand what he had come to do. And we read about that today as well.

If he was speaking to us, He would say "I am the Chosen One, and we would understand that he's someone who has come to defeat evil and restore the world. And friends if that is true...then its time to celebrate, not fast.

Fasting was appropriate in preparing for the arrival of the chosen One, the Bridegroom, but once He arrives to accomplish His destiny and bring in the Kingdom of God then that changes things.

Fasting is no longer appropriate – Jesus casts out demons, you don't need to fast in order to protect yourself from them.

Jesus heals the sick; you don't need to fast in order to petition God for healing. Jesus forgives sins; you don't need to fast in order to show your repentance.

Jesus is God in the flesh; you don't need to fast in order to be reminded of your mortality, the consequences of our sin. Jesus lifts you up and restores you as being made in God's image and offers eternal life.

You see friends - It's all about why you fast and do what you do. Fasting for the old reasons was now obsolete and was best left behind.

In fact trying to participate in what Jesus was doing as He went around ministering by practicing the old hallmarks of religious disciplines – like fasting – wouldn't work. It wouldn't accomplish what you were trying to achieve through it, and it would prevent you from experiencing it in Jesus.

So, Jesus illustrates, your old coat will have a larger hole in it, and the old wineskins will burst and the new wine will be wasted.

You see friends, if we try to understand what Jesus is all about... we can't use the common understanding of religion which looks at how much people pray and fast, or how moral and good they are, or how much they believe in peace and love.

In fact you will need to leave behind that way of thinking, in fact you will need to leave behind your religion in order to

follow Jesus, the bridegroom, and experience the new way God wants to have a relationship with us.

Friends, Jesus Christ is not about religion as it's commonly understood – He is about having a close, intimate, personal, relationship with you. Why do you think the metaphor used here is “the bridegroom?” Jesus Christ wants to be close to you – not watching us from a distance a la Better Midler.

Because of God's love, because of His compassion for us – because He desires to return things to the way He always intended it to be God – *remember God used to take evening walks with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden* - He has opened up a direct route to Himself through Jesus Christ.

Before it was a noble but dubious attempt to try to connect with God for forgiveness, healing, protection, and petitions through things like fasting, etc...

But now that the new way in Christ has been opened up for us, to try to connect with God in those old ways...to *insist* on

trying to connect to God in those old ways? Why would you if you knew they didn't work and there was a new way open?

Friends, this challenges us to relate to our religious friends and neighbors and family members in a whole new way. Instead of admiring them at arms length for their religious disciplines like fasting for a whole month, refusing to eat pork, or being vegetarian.

We need to build close relationships with them to understand why they think their religion truly helps them connect to God, so that we know how to present the new way that God has opened up for people to receive His forgiveness and experience His love.

And since God wants to give this to everyone – keep talking with them. Eventually you'll get the chance to share the good news with them - that they don't need to do all those religious disciplines anymore, Jesus Christ is the guaranteed way to connect with God now.

And friends, its easy to for us to go back to the old ways too – we're still waiting for Christ to make all things new, and until then we are still affected by our sin and tempted to try to connect with God outside of Christ.

How often do we beat ourselves up and emotionally fast in some way after we've given into temptation for the millionth time, hoping that God will truly see how sorry we are and forgive us... yet again!

We secretly wonder how many times God can do this before he gets disillusioned with us and says “no more, I've had it with you!” Maybe there's something we can do to convince him we're worth all the forgiveness?

Friends, be reassured there is no need for us to do anything else but trust Jesus – and instead of telling us to fast our Lord commanded us to feast.

On the night when he was going to offer up his life as the complete and full payment for every sin we have ever done and ever will do...

Jesus instituted a feast, He broke bread to remind his disciples that his body was broken for our sins, and they ate it to symbolize how Christ gives us life.

And Jesus instructed his disciples to drink from the cup to assure us that there was a new way to connect with God – a new covenant, sealed... guaranteed by his blood, never to be undone.

And so when we struggle, when we doubt, when we are tempted... friends – we don't fast, we feast!

Not very spiritual or religious by worldly standards I know,

but friends the Bridegroom has come once, we're waiting for Him to come again –

The time for religion is over, the time for celebration and feasting is here! Amen.