

RENEWING GRACE
Mark 2:18-22

Good News of Grace
June 9, 2013
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I remember my first year at the seminary, living in the dorm, how one of my classmates who lived across the hall came back from Christmas break with a home wine-making kit he had received as a gift. Some of the rest of us on our floor watched him one day as he attempted to make dandelion wine.

He added all the ingredients in a bottle, put a balloon like top on it and put it on his shelf to wait for a number of weeks before it would be ready. It takes time for the ingredients to convert into wine. In the meantime he noticed that the balloon never expanded like it was supposed to and the color didn't clear up like the directions said.

So after following the directions and time table he invited us all in to have a taste. I hate to say it but it was the worst tasting stuff ever. It tasted like a really bad vinegar. He certainly must have done something wrong in the process.

Wine, of course, as I looked up on the Internet is a natural process where yeast converts the sugar in fruit juice into alcohol and carbon dioxide. It is a fermentation process where the yeast acts as a living organism actively changing and regenerating its content. It is a purifying process where the fruit juice and sugar become alcohol.

Jesus was one who used the analogy of wine to help explain what new life and faith in God is all about. In fact, he talks about in Mark's Gospel that this new wine of faith in Jesus cannot be put in old or patched wineskins. This active regeneration will actually burst the skins. Jesus therefore says that one needs to put new wine into fresh wineskins.

The truth is that when Jesus and the new life of his Spirit come into a person's heart it is like yeast converting the contents of our lives. It bubbles up and expands and regenerates; it purifies and changes our hearts and minds; it fills us with new visions and hopes for bringing new life to others. The new wine of the Holy Spirit is alive, growing, filling life with fragrance and joy.

When Jesus came to earth it was obvious that the old structures and traditions could not hold his truth and new life. In fact, he burst these old wineskins apart until the leaders tried to do away with him completely by nailing him to a cross. His message of change and new life was too threatening to all those wanting to be in control.

And when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, when this new wine filled the followers of Jesus, a powerful movement began in the church which no opponent could contain. God's Spirit working in people's hearts bubbled over until the whole world and all of history was changed. Yes, the new wine of Jesus could not be put in old wineskins.

And the same thing has been true at other times in church history. For example, during the Reformation in the 1500's the old wineskins of hierarchical church structures and human made rituals could not hold the new wine of Martin Luther's bold stance in God's Word alone. In fact, this reformation brought the new wine of reform to people's lives, to local churches, and even sparked new reformers and denominations.

And today like each time in history the new wine of the Holy Spirit is permeating people's lives, and Jesus' church, in many new and exciting ways. This new life in Jesus continues to bubble up and change hearts and lives. The power of the Holy Spirit continues to bring regeneration and renewal. In fact, I believe it is one of the greatest times in history as far as what the Spirit is and can be doing.

Jesus said in John 3:8, *"The wind (of the Spirit) blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

In the same way it is important to note that this new wine of Jesus' grace continues to challenge the old wineskins in our world right now, today. It continues to challenge those whose faith may be stagnant, or dormant, or whose faith may be focused in the wrong place.

This new wine continues to challenge old church structures, denominational practices, worship formats, ways of giving and of being involved. In many cases this new wine has literally broken those old sacred wineskins apart so the Holy Spirit is set free in new ways.

It is interesting to observe the debate that is often going on between certain theologians, certain denominational leaders, and some church people. It is obvious that there are those who seem to be very nervous about the new wine of the Holy Spirit along with the renewal and new life it is bringing about. There are some who actually want to try to keep control of the Holy Spirit through imposing even more rituals and structures.

Martin Luther, however, founded our Lutheran church on the power of God's Word, not church or human made structures. He raised up the doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers where every person is equal in God's calling. Luther was clear that God's power is found only in his Word of truth, and in the regenerating and grace-filled power of the Holy Spirit.

Luther set forth the example that through the new wine of God's Spirit that the church continually needs to be reformed. New wineskins need to continually be developed to reach each generation for Jesus. The truth is that God always seeks to move his church forward.

I heard a helpful illustration onetime. It talked about how wine can be put in three completely different containers and still be wine. It can be put in a glass, in a coffee mug, in a jar. No matter what the container looks like, the wine does not change.

The application is that in the church and in our faith the new wine of God's Word, and Spirit, can also be put into different containers and not change the content. It can be put into new music, new forms, new liturgies, new structures just as well as being put into more traditional hymns and worship. The key, however, in any form is that it enables God's Spirit to be set free.

The danger, as this illustration explained, is when people begin to treasure the container more than the content; when the liturgy or form is more important than the new wine of the Spirit; when preserving this form is more important than reaching all people for Christ.

The person sharing this illustration also pointed out an important concern about certain church groups who claim to have the right and pure container, but then are actually changing the content they are putting in. Some claim to do the “right” worship, but then avoid proclaiming the life-changing message or truth of Jesus.

Some are preaching mostly about political or social justice issues. Some are dabbling in new age theologies where they proclaim that there are many ways to heaven besides Jesus. Some are simply telling nice feel-good stories with only a passing message of God and very little, if any, Biblical content. The container can easily be more important than God’s truth.

Studies have found lately that a number of churches who have the higher and more ritualistic liturgies, the more traditional robes, hymns and rituals are in certain cases the churches becoming more non-traditional in their Biblical message. Increasing numbers are becoming very free in watering down certain traditional Biblical truths.

On the other hand a growing number of the churches with the most traditional Biblical message, the ones which really hold up the importance of Biblical truth in matters of faith and life, are often the least ritualistic in their worship and are often using lots of variety in music. Rather than worshipping the structure they want their focus on Jesus’ truth to empower the Spirit to work in them, and to lead them forth, in mission.

As I have often said at Messiah we will always seek to use various kinds of worship and programs with containers that include some of the best hymns, the best traditions, along with new forms and praise songs. I have also affirmed that the truth and message of God’s Word will not be compromised in this congregation.

Jesus said in Acts 1:8, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Our mission is clear, my friends. It is centered not in worshipping the container, the structures, but to do whatever we can to bring the new wine of God’s Spirit to everyone.

I need to say that I am really excited about all the renewing grace, all the new wine of faith and vision that is bubbling up each day in our church. Lot of people are hearing and responding to God’s word. New life is being felt as many of you are sharing the joy of Jesus with others. The reality is that when Jesus lives in our hearts, when the yeast of his gracious Spirit is working in us, it bubbles out and cannot be contained.

How about you today, my friend? Is the grace, and new wine of Jesus’ Spirit, living in your heart and life? Is his life giving power working in you, changing and renewing you in the wine of new life? That is what Jesus came to do in each of us. May we allow him to make us fresh wineskins so the new wine of his grace fills us with new life each day.