Wineskins and Church Challenges  Mark 2:18-22  10/28/12

Millions of people have various kinds of heart procedures done each year. But many of these procedures are a temporary fix. If the patient wants to remain healthy, he or she needs to make lifestyle changes- stop smoking, lose weight, exercise, and cut down on drinking. Doctors tell their patients that in essence they must change, or they will die. Doctors can be annoying that way! You would think that such dire news would motivate the vast majority of patients to make those changes. You would be wrong! Unfortunately, 90% of patients refuse to make the necessary changes, even though they know it is probably costing them time off of their lives! Apparently, change is so difficult for us human beings that's we’d rather risk death than eat more broccoli. I can actually understand that!

The Christian Church is caught in a time of intense and rapid cultural change to which it is struggling to adapt. Many of us grew up in a time of quasi-Christendom during which the institutions of our society supported the work of the church. Community groups didn’t dream of holding activities on a Sunday morning, and blue laws restricted commerce on Sundays. School classes opened with prayer and Bible reading. Pastors held a respected and privileged position in most communities and churches had a good bit of power in their communities. And it was expected that families would have some kind of church membership, even if they weren’t particularly active in their church.
We can no longer count on that kind of support from our society for the Christian faith. In fact, some of the previously named practices are now illegal in this country! The percentage of people attending church is down significantly. Mainline denominations, like we Presbyterians, have lost around half of our members over the last 40-50 years. A Washington Post headline describes today’s mainline churches as “Smaller and Grayer.” A recent Pew survey found that the number of folks who claim no religious affiliation at all now stands at 20% of all Americans and is closer to 30% of young adults.

The problem we face is that many of our church practices, staffing models, and governing structures were created during that earlier time when the overwhelming number of our citizens embraced some form of Christianity. Today, many of our neighbors and family members have no vital relationship with any church or with Jesus Christ. And our current approaches are not up to the new challenges we are facing, leading to the decline in numbers we are seeing. It is clear that if we keep doing the same things we’ve always done, we’ll continue to see the same results. So what do we do?

A story from Jesus’ life is of some help to us here.

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus said to them, “The
wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?
As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

“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.” (Mark 2:18-22)

During Jesus’ day fasting was one of three primary Jewish practices, along with giving to the poor and prayer. And the Pharisees had taken the few fasts commanded in the Old Testament and added a bunch more. People noticed that Jesus and his disciples didn’t fast much. They wondered why this was, because fasting was what good religious people were supposed to do! So they asked Jesus. He responded with three mini-parables.

He noted that no one would expect the guests at a week-long Palestinian wedding to fast while the groom was still around. Weddings are times for celebration and feasting! Jesus says he is like that groom! In Jesus, God himself was visiting our planet, the Guest of honor. As long as he was there, people should celebrate! Fasting was an occasion for repentance and sorrow, and this was not the time for that.
He goes on to talk about how no one would try to patch an old piece of clothing with a new, unshrunk piece of cloth. It just wouldn’t work. The new patch would shrink when the garment was washed and make things worse than before. In the same way, he said that no one would put new wine in old wineskins. In Jesus time, wine was not stored in bottles, but in animal skins. New skins had a certain amount of elasticity, which would stretch as the still-fermenting wine expanded in volume. But putting new wine in old skins would stretch them past their limit. They would split open and the wine would be lost.

So what does that have to do with change in the church? Sometimes new methods are needed in changing times- new wineskins- but the church, like all organizations, tends to resist change. As someone once said, the only person who likes change is a wet baby! But change is nothing new for the church, because over its history, the church has endured many profound changes. The early church was composed almost entirely of Jews. When Gentiles started coming to faith in Jesus, the church struggled greatly with how to accommodate them into it. Did Gentiles have to become Jewish first? Did they have to follow all or some of the Jewish law? Could Christian Jews fellowship with Christian Gentiles?

In the early centuries, the church also struggled with periodic persecution from local authorities as well as from the Romans. That
shaped their identity, practices, and self-image as a persecuted minority. But when the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian around 330 A.D., persecution ceased, and in time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. That resulted in tremendous change in church practice and emphasis.

Today is Reformation Sunday. It reminds us of a time of tumultuous change in the church starting around 1500. It led to the major changes in theology, how we worship, church music, church government, and eventually led to the founding of hundreds of Christian denominations instead of the one or two that had existed for our first 1500 years.

The invention of the printing press assisted in turning worship from a primarily visual and oral experience into one in which the printed word plays a large role. It’s hard to imagine our worship without the bulletin/screen to assist us. It’s hard to imagine our faith without a printed Bible available to us. The disestablishment of the church in the 1700’s-separating it from government- also led to tremendous changes in church traditions and practices. And church music has been changing from earliest times. Wayne Conover gave me a Presbyterian hymnal from the 1840’s. I was astounded to see how few of the hymns that appear in it are familiar to us today. Music has always changed in our churches.

Many of us grew up in churches that used the King James Version of the Bible, a wonderful, powerful translation done in 1611. We couldn’t have
imagined using anything else. But few churches use that translation today. The Elizabethan English of the King James Version is very hard to understand, and we have better, earlier manuscripts of the Scriptures than the authors of the King James Version had available to them, so that we now have more accurate translations that we use instead.

The point is that the changes we face shouldn’t frighten us. God’s people have dealt with changes before. And God will see us through the changes that lie before us. But what might those changes be? I am not a fortune-teller; I can’t see the future, but it seems to me that we’re going to need changes in at least three areas.

First, we are going to need to see our churches more as mission stations and less as clubs. When the culture was mostly Christian, or at least largely understood the basics of Christian faith, mainline churches didn’t need to emphasize evangelism. That is no longer the case. Fewer people are even coming to church nowadays. And fewer people know anything about Christian beliefs and practices. I performed a funeral a few years ago for a man from the community. His 12 year-old grandson was there. Before the service, I met with the family and explained to them how the service would work. I told them that I would lead them into the sanctuary and they would be seated into the front pew. The twelve year-old turned to his mother and asked, “Mom, what’s a pew?” We can no longer assume that people have even basic knowledge about what we do
here! One implication of this is that we need to be careful to explain what we’re doing in worship so newer people can understand and participate. And we’ll need more classes in basic Christianity, too.

The other implication has to do with the fact many people aren’t coming to church at all! How can we fulfill our mission to make disciples of all people, if people aren’t coming to our worship and classes like they used to? We will need to focus time, energy, and money on training our own members- you!- so that you can be faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ with you neighbors, family members, colleagues at work, fellow club members, fellow students, etc. The work of the church needs to extend beyond what happens here on Sunday morning, because there’s a real sense in which we are now missionaries for Jesus Christ right here in Gettysburg and Littlestown and Hanover.

Second, we are already in a time of tremendous foment in worship here in the US and around the world. There are traditional services, seeker services, high liturgy services, contemplative Taize services, art-centered services, and contemporary services of many kinds. Some services are high on emotion, while others are more staid. Some use all kinds of new technologies including dramatic lighting, videos, smoke pots, and even cell phone technology. Others are very plain vanilla. Services are not only held in church buildings; They are now held in bars, in theaters, in coffee shops, schools, and in malls- going to where people already are. Some
churches have multiple campuses, with worship services at all of them held simultaneously. I think churches will need to continue to experiment with new worship styles and approaches as we seek to find what best helps contemporary people connect with God.

Finally, I think churches will need to respond to the ethnic changes taking place in our country. White Americans will no longer constitute a majority of our population by 2050. Churches need to find ways to reach out to our ethnic minority neighbors. In some cases that will involve planting new churches with different styles of worship, perhaps held in a different language, perhaps hosted in our own buildings. In other cases, it will involve taking intentional steps to invite our ethnic neighbors into our existing churches. But the church will quickly become irrelevant in this country if it does not find a way to reach out to ethnic minorities. We haven’t been very good at this in the past. It’s time to learn.

To review: I think churches will see changes in how we view ourselves, moving to seeing ourselves as more of a mission station. I think we’ll continue to see changes in worship. And I think we’ll need to find ways to reach out to ethnic minorities, which will involve all kinds of changes. And yet, some things will not change. We will continue to experience God as our Creator and Father, Jesus as our Savior and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as God’s presence with us. We will continue to be called to love and serve one another and the world around
us. We will continue to regularly worship and study together. We will continue to train our children and one another in discipleship. The core of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ will remain the same.

A few years ago on New Year’s Eve, a casino in Las Vegas imploded its multi-million dollar building to make room for a bigger and more functional casino. The imploded building, which was only ten years old, had served them well when it was built, but it no longer served their mission as well as a new building could. So they tore it down to make room for another. Achieving their mission was the deciding factor in such a decision.

Change is never easy. But I hope that God is working in your heart so that you would be willing to embrace all kinds of change if it would help us to more effectively accomplish our mission of making devoted followers of Jesus. It is really a heart issue, isn’t it? Is church about our comfort, or about accomplishing the work to which God has called us? We can keep doing what we’ve been doing for the last 50 years, and we’ll continue to decline and eventually die, or we can face the realities of our contemporary world, and with God’s help, make wise changes so that we can fulfill our mission. Are you ready for the coming changes? Pray that God would make you ready, so that you will not only tolerate them, but will welcome them and lead them so we can be the people God is calling us to be today!