

“Breaking Convention”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 12, 2020

**Mark 2:1-22**

*When [Jesus] returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he said to the paralytic— “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “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.”*

*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.”*

Ten years ago, I was just starting ministry with my first congregation, in a small blue-collar suburb southeast of St. Paul. The church had mostly older, white, straight members and struggled to make its budget. Yet they had made the bold decision to become Open and Affirming to LGBTQ people during the interim process, and had invited me there fresh out of seminary. In meeting with a pastor colleague to prepare for my ordination, she suggested that my ministry would be planting a new church within the old one, rather like a fallen nurse tree gives its energy and nutrients to new trees that grow up from its trunk.

We changed and grew a fair amount in my six and a half years with that church, but I can’t say that we realized her sense of a new church *distinct* from the old. Rather, the longtime folks and I adapted in ways that welcomed more people and changed along with the new ministry possibilities. Their religious traditions are not being replaced but transformed through the faithful process of continually adapting to better include those who needed a welcoming community. At the installation service of their new pastor several years ago, I marveled at their dynamic visuals, more flexible worship space, vital music, and the new members of the church that are largely LGBTQ and African American. The old church has become a new one, not eclipsing but growing from the gifts of flexibility in its longtime members.

These dynamics of new and old are at play in Jesus' day, and he describes them with metaphors of patches and wineskins. New patches on old clothing may create a misfit that does more harm than good. Likewise, new wine needed to be kept in skins that are also new. One commentary explains that, "New wine still has fermenting to do and this causes an expansion in volume within the wine skin. New skins have an ability to stretch to accommodate this but old skins are done with stretching. That is why the new wine will burst the old skins, leading to a loss of the new wine and destruction of the old skin."<sup>1</sup> Jesus uses this image to describe the tension and challenge that arise as he expands the boundaries of who is judged worthy, righteous, forgiven, and part of the community of God's beloved. We hear the critique in today's text—he's eating with unsavory characters, and not following the fasting practices of the religious authorities. The rules about who's in and who's out are being scrambled, along with what's required for righteousness and forgiveness. Tax collectors who handle impure money and act on behalf of Roman occupiers might still be worthy of table kinship. People can be miraculously forgiven, and healed by sudden intervening grace. This disruption isn't easy for the Pharisees who segregate people from the company of the faithful for the sake of purity. However, Jesus is building a broader community that integrates former outsiders like tax collectors, sinners and those who are sick. The fizzy wine of new energy and expanded community would break open the religion of the Pharisees. Old skins for old wine, and new skins for new wine.

I'm hoping for a third option though, perhaps beyond what's possible in nature. I hope that old wineskins can become new again, or at least stay supple enough to carry the buoyant energy of new wine. I say that because we are a community of old skins. (Perhaps I should say that differently!) What I mean is that Protestant churches used to be called "mainline", but are now starting to be called "oldline", or in the terms of today's gospel, "old wine". In other words, we know the tension of being out of sync with the culture now, of having the new ways of our world not fit well into the forms, customs, and old wineskins of the church. Work and other activities are now scheduled on Sunday mornings, families are too rushed to participate in traditional Christian education, volunteer labor is harder to come by for church activities, and communication needs multiply with websites and social media pages. Here in this space, we are navigating physical changes for the sake of the 21st century. One of my mentors once pointed out that when congregations create a building, they get to shape the space to best serve the congregation's ministries. But over time, the building exerts subtle influence, until it's telling the congregation what is and is not possible. So every once in awhile, congregations need to reassert the form and use of buildings in order to remain faithful to the purpose and changing ministries of God's people. The wineskin must be changed in order to hold new wine.

This is not change for its own sake, or to follow the latest fad. There is old wine that needs old wineskins in order to be most fully expressed. But just as culture changes over generations, and just as Judaism has continued adapting to new circumstances over centuries, Christ calls us to continually renew the church, honoring older forms of community while also making space for what's emerging. One scripture interpreter puts the questions of change to the church in this way: "What are the customs and traditions that have stretched all they can but are found in some way wanting as we reach beyond boundaries to share the gospel? ...What are we prepared to put aside for the sake of becoming new wineskins for the gospel's fermenting truth?"<sup>2</sup>

For Jesus and the friends we encounter in Scripture today, the crucial point is healing, by whatever means necessary. We see a paralyzed man who is left out as crowds gather around the righteous teacher. Jesus could heal this man, if only the man weren't hidden and excluded. The friends of this man, seeing the obstruction of the crowd, take other liberating action. They carry him up on the flat roof of the

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<sup>1</sup> *spill the beans*, vol. 17 (spillbeans.org.uk: Spill the Beans Resource Team, 2015), pg. 65.

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building and dig through it to Jesus, working through the barrier in an unconventional way so that neither building nor crowd can hinder the man's healing. Note that Jesus doesn't chastise the friends for their trespass of property, or fret about how the sticks, dust, and roof particles will be picked up and replaced. That would have been on the mind of many, but what's most important for Jesus is the friends' faith and the man's healing. Roofs can be opened, crowds can be parted, and healing can come in new ways by the power of the one who forgives sin, strengthens the weak, and creates anew.

I hope we don't need to follow this story literally, putting a hole in our roof for folks to be lowered down on stretchers for the healing of Christ's community. But this is our charge to build a community that cares enough to change, offering the healing of courageous, joyful Christian faith to each person, in new ways as needed for the sake of those left out or shut out. This is how old wineskins—all that we have inherited from those who came before—change to hold and serve the new wine of Christ's mission in the 21st century. This is why we do the hard work of adapting our community, building, and practices so that young children can attend a local preschool that teaches lifelong values, so that LGBTQ people are not excluded but welcomed to church, so that youth leadership is formed in the crucible of theatrical productions, so that uncommon community can gather "after dark" with stories and music, so that white privilege cannot stand in the way of God's beloved community, so that worship prioritizes the people of God within the sanctuary building, so that the gospel of God's healing love is expressed in multiple voices and new visual ways that are easier to understand. The process of such change can be as disruptive as demolition and construction, but it is the path that leads to abundant life with Christ. We accept such tension and challenge as part of being made new in order to serve anew. May we prove wise in honoring the old wine yet willing enough to change that we can hold the new wine of God's Spirit, as She leads us to life in the world today. Amen.