

NEW WINE IN NEW WINESKINS

We humans are often schizophrenic when it comes to the old and the new. On one hand, we are creatures of tradition. We follow the same daily routine. We sit in the same pew at worship. We find comfort in things which are familiar. Change is something we'd rather avoid. On the other hand, we often seek those activities and items which have the potential to rescue us from the depths of boredom—bigger houses—exotic vacations—fancier cars.

Actually, this is just the tip of the iceberg. All too often we find ourselves caught up in destructive behavior but are hesitant to confront it and make changes because we are afraid of the new and unknown. I also wonder how often we act out our boredom in ways that are unhealthy and hurtful. John's gospel frankly acknowledges this in his opening chapter when he speaks about people preferring to live in darkness. Because this characteristic is ingrained in human nature, we need some outside help if we are to move out of our darkness and into the light of the new.

This morning we hear Jesus telling us that his mission and purpose are to do exactly that. He uses imagery that is unfamiliar to us in these days of bottled wine. Nevertheless, if we can get behind that imagery, we will discover a new dimension to life, which is so powerful that it cannot be contained by our old ways of doing things. Let's talk about old wineskins first. I think about the shootings that have taken place in schools and that have been perpetrated by young people who are barely out of childhood. I think about the gang wars taking place in the cities in which innocent bystanders get shot because they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I think about the fighting that is taking place in various parts of the world. Whether it goes by the name of ethnic cleansing or civil war makes no difference. People are still needlessly dying because the political powers that be are seeking to strengthen their control. What can possibly possess all these people to do the things they are doing? Can't they see the destructive nature of their actions?

I think about the racial and economical barriers that divide communities and neighborhoods. I see people trapped in poverty in rundown housing, in jobs that pay less than a living wage. I think of people who have tried to improve their quality of life but found the doors closed because they were of the wrong ethnic background. The list is endless. Just pick up any paper or turn on a television newscast.

The discouraging part of all of this is that it is not new. The methods of destroying life may have changed from spears to handguns, but the sin and evil in the hearts of those doing it have been the same since the beginning of time when Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy. Is there any hope for something new?

The Gospel proclaims the answer to be a resounding “YES!!” The power of God is like new wine in fresh wineskins, even when the “Old appears to be entrenched in the fabric of humanity.

This world still belongs to God, the creator of it all. Remember the words of the hymn: “This is my Father’s world; oh, let me not forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.” Nations may rattle their military weapons. Gangs may battle for turf control. But the one who is still in charge is God! That brings me to the new wine that Jesus talks about.

We often forget that God is still in control because we measure his power in human terms. We wonder why God doesn’t use his immeasurable power to step in and wipe out evil. We wonder why God doesn’t assemble an army of angels to thwart injustice and oppression. That’s where we miss God’s message. The new wine of God’s power is focused in a different kind of weapon. It is found on a cross! It is the crucified one, Jesus—God’s power made known in weakness.

Rather than looking for new life in the pleasures that life offers, God calls us to find new life in Jesus. He was hardly a mighty warrior or a conquering hero. But his life, death, and resurrection on behalf of all humanity have restored creation back to its creator. That, my friends, is the ultimate in power!!

Where do we find this new kind of life? Where do we meet this new kind of power? We meet it first in Holy Baptism in which God uses water and his word to change us into new persons. In this event, God’s powerful grace takes root in our lives, even though it happens to most of us at a time when we do not realize what is going on around us. For those who are baptized at a later age, it is God’s own Spirit who touches hearts and souls and calls repentant sinners who are tired of destructive living into a new way of living.

Much has been made in our generation of our renewable natural resources. The wonder of our baptism is that it is a daily renewable resource. Every day is a new day for us. Every day God wipes the slate of our sins blank and gives us a brand new opportunity to live for him. Every day is a new beginning to experience the richness and joy of our Creator’s grace. Over the years I have discovered that a fair number of good folks still harbor secret guilt over some of their past sins. Forget them! Set them aside! God has forgiven them and he has forgotten them.

There is a second place where we meet this new kind of power—in the sacrament of Holy Communion. When I think that God has the power to make every person bow down at his feet in worship, I am awestruck about the simple way in which God moves mountains through bread broken and wine poured. Here is what is truly new. “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for your sins.” It is this living presence of Christ that makes us new each time we share it along side our sisters and brothers in faith. As Paul puts it, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old passed away, behold the new has come.”

Notice that the setting for this sacramental power is communal. New life in Christ is never a "SOLO" experience. I think of people who have told me that they don't need to come to church because they have their own personal relationship with God. That's not what I read in the Bible. The new wineskin of God's new power is the body of Christ, the Church. I realize that the church has not been a perfect institution over the centuries. I realize that we still have debates over dogma and policies. I realize that we still use humanly contrived notions to avoid sitting with each other at our Lord's Table of grace. But the scriptural reality remains: God comes to us through the community of faith. Please remember Jesus' high priestly prayer that, indeed, the time will come when we will all be one in him.

New wine in new wineskins is a new kind of power for a new kind of living. May God grant us grace to let go of the old and embrace the new. Amen.