

“The Power of Good Timing”
Sermon from Mark 2:18-22
Given Sunday, October 4, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees fasted regularly. Some people came to Jesus with the objection, “Why do John’s disciples and those of the Pharisees fast, while yours don’t?” Jesus replied, “How can wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is still among them? So long as the bridegroom stays with them, they cannot fast. The day will come, however, when the bridegroom will be taken away; on that day they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth onto an old cloak. Otherwise, the patch pulls away from it - the new from the old - and the tear gets worse. Similarly, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If one does, the wine will burst the skins, and both wine and skins will be lost. No, new wine is poured into new wineskins.”

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This church, where I am this morning, has a lot of memories for me. I was a member here for seven years, an associate pastor here for five. My first Sunday, I came not knowing anything about this place, just curious, and when the service ended, the congregation rose from their seats and took hands around the sanctuary. As they looked into each other’s faces, they sang their benediction to one another, like we do on Communion Sundays. Their song had a beautiful melody, with simple lyrics: Peace before us, peace behind us, peace under our feet. Peace within us, peace over us, let all around us be peace. It’s a song we’ve sung at our own prayer and

meditation services; a song we've sung at Wednesday night gatherings.

I'd soon come to learn that that sung benediction was their weekly ritual – that they'd taken hands and sung that particular song together every week since their very first gathering in a living room. No tradition had been with that church longer. No song meant more to them, or encompassed the hope of that community better: peace for each one, in that circle and everywhere in our world. Peace that they could know, and that they could be a part of bringing to their neighborhoods, and that would radiate out all around.

It's a song by David Haas, a man who wrote many beautiful hymns, especially centered on themes of peace, justice, and inclusion. And in May, allegations against David Haas began to surface, women claiming he'd used his position as a spiritual mentor and guide to manipulate and coerce them, to commit acts of sexual misconduct against them. To date there are more than 40 women alleging these crimes. And out of respect for those women, churches across the country aren't singing his songs anymore. It is too painful for too many people to sing and hear his music and know that he used the platform he gained from offering it to cause such harm to others.

So this church, that sang the same song every Sunday for 30 years, starting with ten of them on couches in a founding member's home, growing to hundreds of them spread across a sprawling sanctuary, this church that has that song as part of their original DNA, they have to find something new now. I mean, they don't have to, but they're choosing to. Because they know more of the story now. And it is essential – I think this is the message here – it is essential that our faith reflect and be responsive to what we know.

I think that's what Jesus is telling those he's with in our scripture for today. Not that fasting is wrong and they should be done with it, but that they should be paying attention to the world around them, keeping up with what's happening, and letting that inform their faith. Judaism required only one day of fasting a year – on the Day of Atonement – but in this story, Jesus' disciples are criticized for not going above and beyond that requirement, like John's disciples and those of the Pharisees do. For them, that one-day-a-year obligation, by the time of our story, had morphed into a two-day-a-week observation. These other followers were abstaining from food, and drink, and probably sex, every Monday and Thursday – and, what's more – they were making sure everyone knew about it.

And Jesus comes along doing something different, his students not practicing this excessive denial, and they're criticized for it – in other places they're called gluttons, and drunkards. And Jesus tells the critics: pay attention to what time it is. Be here now. Something new is happening, and if you insist on staying where you are, with how things have always been, you will miss it.

Now that we're in Mark, we'll be using a lot from Ched Myers' commentary on this gospel, called *Binding the Strong Man*. It's a political reading of Mark's Gospel, pointing out for us where and how questions of power are taken up here. Myers writes that the term used for "new" in this scripture – *kainos* - is usually identified with eschatological re-creation – meaning, with what will finally be, with the way all things are being made new. He writes, "Mark is here concerned to distinguish *the radical social practice of the kingdom* from *the cosmetic social piety of the Pharisaic holiness codes*." In other words, this is a debate about how things are, and can be, versus how things look, or are perceived to be. Myers continues, "The 'young' discipleship movement must not conform to a practice that *looks* novel, even progressive, but in truth is 'old,' meaning *fundamentally aligned with the dominant symbolic order*. To do so – to conform in that way – would be to jeopardize the messianic

project, represented by the images of a 'worse tear' and 'the wine and skins will both be lost'."

He's saying, "They can dress it up how they want to, but what's happening here is the preservation of tradition – the intensification of it to the point that it becomes meaningless – at the expense of real engagement with who and where people are now."

And so the questions facing the community in our story are the same ones facing our church – maybe every church, and maybe always, but especially now – as we all navigate this changing reality and seek to be responsive to it and faithful to one another.

Questions like: Where are your loyalties – with the tradition or with the movement? Where is the heartbeat of this community – with what has been or with what might be, with what is coming to be, even now? Or, what is a way of embracing the faith we inherit *and* opening to all that is still being revealed?

Fasting – at least in the context of our scripture – is an act of repentance. It's an activity for times of sorrow and grief.

Commentator David Ewart says John and other prophets like him and their students fasted as a sign of protest for the evil and

corruption of their present age, and as an act of sorrow for its impending doom.

And Jesus didn't. Because Jesus viewed this moment – his lifetime – as the time when God's kingdom was at hand. He uses the metaphor of a wedding because a new covenant, a new relationship, maybe even a new reality is coming to be. And that's cause for hope, for rejoicing, even. But for it to come to be, some of what's cherished about the way things have been will have to fall to the side. Or be exposed for the hypocrisy they had always been. Or be rewritten to better respond to the new day.

And there will be mourning in that, to be sure. There will be some sorrowing for what has been meaningful but then has been corrupted, some regret for what once gave life and now brings pain. But Jesus' invitation is to look at the world and imagine a beginning, not just an ending. These are not only dying groans but also birthing moans; Jesus is inviting the faithful not to say goodbye but hello, and hello again, and again, in each new moment.

And it's not that one is hard and one is easy. They are both extraordinarily hard. It is difficult to choose to say goodbye, for the time being or forever, to pieces of our lives that have mattered so

much. And it is hard to change our routines, to adjust our loves, as we learn more. It is maybe most hard to cultivate the kind of openness required for learning more, because we know as we do, it'll just ask us to say another goodbye. But it will also invite us to another hello.

World Communion Sunday invites us to be here now – and, to be everywhere. To remember all who are here now and to call to mind our siblings nearby and around the globe: to remember their challenges and their joys, and the ways we are connected to them. To ask: What do we know about the lives of people far from us? What do we know about their celebrations and struggles? About their access to food and water and health care? About their working conditions and their political climates, about the dangers they face and the places they find sanctuary? And how does what we know shape our faith and inform our practice?

Jesus feasts with his followers because a new world is coming to be. I confess, I've been more like John and his folks lately, fasting, mourning, because of all that is so broken and corrupt and unjust in these days. And I think that's a natural reaction to what's happening all around us. But I want to pay more attention – and to encourage all of us to pay more attention – to the invitation of Jesus here, that

tells us there is promise in the present moment: the promise that seeing and hearing each other's realities can help us craft something faithful to our past but attentive to each other – and in so doing, we become faithful to our future as well. May it be so.