

“The Old Is Better.” – November 13, 2016
by Wayne J. Schneider – Credo en Unam Diem

“The Old Is Better.”
St. Luke 5:17-39

Today’s “hard saying” doesn’t appear to be a “hard saying.” It sounds more like a wine lover’s fondness for old wine. So, what is difficult about that? At first blush it is not demanding to understand or accept. However, when we grasp the implication of what Jesus is saying, this is a had saying indeed.

Like all of Jesus teachings there are different levels of this parable. We need to hear these words through the ears of crowd who first heard them. This parable was given in Capernaum in answer to the Scribes and Pharisees who condemned Jesus’ non-conforming ministry. Just prior to the wineskin parable, St. Luke tells us what upset these religious leaders.

Jesus was preaching in a house when a paralyzed man was lowered through the roof on a stretcher to Jesus. The man’s friends needed to get him to the Master quickly. Can you imagine the bewilderment of these religious leaders over this interruption, particularly when Jesus not only healed him, but forgave his sins! Again, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of blasphemy, saying, “*Who but God can forgive sins!*”

Jesus then walks along the street that ran through Capernaum, and meets Levi the tax collector, who is also called Matthew. Tax collectors were deeply hated because they not only collected import and export taxes for the Romans, but charged additional taxes they kept for themselves. The Jews judged these collectors as enemies. Jesus however saw Matthew as a man who needed love and forgiveness.

It was not only wrong in the eyes of the religious leaders to speak with Matthew, but Jesus accepts an invitation to dinner. In Matt’s home were other tax collectors, outcasts, and ‘sinners.’ And, if **THAT** didn’t take the cake, the rage of the leaders SCREAMED to the boiling point when Jesus and his followers did not fast. A ‘good’ Jew

fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. But, rare was the person who could say WHY they did so.

Jesus clarifies by showing that life with him is like a marriage banquet. In Jesus' day an entire week was spent in celebration with the bride and groom. Following the rabbinical rule, the bridal party and their friends were not required to follow religious observances like fasting.

Jesus asked, *"Can you make friends of the bridegroom fast, while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days."*

In saying this, Jesus identifies with the bridegroom and clearly states that *life with Him* is a joyous celebration. This also indicates that Jesus knew they were plotting against him because, He did not honor their regulations. Jesus was not against the Law or reverencing of God, but the man-made officialdom and traditionalism of the leaders.

Now we can see the power of Jesus' parable of the patch, wineskins, and the preference for old wine. Listen again to this parable: *"No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one, otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'the old is better.'"*

This parable is an introduction to the point Jesus wants to make. His preaching of the Kingdom of God, His Gospel, His joy is the life He offers to everyone. His life is not a repair of the old, threadbare cloth of traditionalism. Jesus did not arrive as the Messiah, the Word, the Light of the world, to humanity to preserve the practice of ritual, that composed the outward religion that kept people from true worship of God. This parable is a warning, a caution.

Jesus then speaks metaphorically to strengthen his point. All of Jesus' listeners were familiar with the fermentation process in wine making. Jesus is a master teacher taking something familiar to explain the unfamiliar they need to grasp. Every adult knew

it was dangerous to put new wine in old wineskins. In the first century, wine was made in the skin or stomach of goats. After everything was removed, they were tanned over fires of acacia wood.

The openings were then sewn closed. The neck hole became the spout for pouring in the unfermented grape juice. When the skin was full, it was sewn shut tightly, and the tempestuous fermentation process began. When complete, the new wineskin was stretched to its fullest. When the wine was used, the empty skin dried, as it hardened it became inflexible. It could no longer be used for winemaking because the fermentation process would break the skin, and both wine and wineskin would be lost.

The interpretation of this parable is vital. The new wine is Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God, the promise of being with us; and the fulfillment of that promise is at the Day of Pentecost. It is Jesus Himself, Lord of our lives and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

To be sure, Jesus means the Israelites and the People of God who first heard this parable. But He expected nothing less from us. WE are to be the new wineskins marked by our pliability, our springiness, our adjustability, as containers of Jesus' radical teachings, and His indwelling presence. I think of it this way: our minds, emotions, and wills are the wineskins of Jesus' new wine today.

When we attempt to put on that privilege, a question comes to mind. This parable does not answer it directly. *"If a wineskin can only be used once, what do we do with our need for daily renewal?"* I believe the implication is that we present to Jesus a new wineskin of an open mind, a receptive heart, and a eager will on a daily basis, ready to obey His guidance.

This is never as easy as it sounds. Like these religious leaders we become at home with our traditions, and we are resistant to change. We are content with our experience of God's power and are apprehensive concerning new challenges. Our wineskins become brittle, dry and inflexible as we struggle to maintain the status quo of our life in Christ.

Can you now see why the conclusion of our Gospel lesson is a “hard saying?” It is so easy to say, *“The old is better.”* We sing, *“Give me that old-time religion, its good enough for me,”* but sometimes we mean, *“Let me stay where I am. I know what I know.”*

There is a “Christianized Pharisaicalism” that can easily blanket us. This may be why St. Luke included this parable. In his travels with St. Paul, St. Luke had seen those who wanted all new believers to become full-fledged Jews before they could become Christians. This could also be said of those in the twenty-first century as well. *“They must become us.”*

Being a new wineskin filled with new wine gives us a unique attitude toward the future. Jesus makes us flexible and open to new ways of doing old things. We are no longer content to ‘the some old some old,’ but have become receptive to God’s limitless creativity.

Jesus’ “hard saying” pierces any hardness of our heart resistant to change, or finds satisfaction with what we have discovered regarding God’s grace. We discover our deep commitment to ‘traditions’ and the stranglehold they may have upon us.

“How do we discover if we are closed off to this new wine of the Other Jesus?” If we did not begin today by giving to God a new, open, receptive, elastic wineskin; if we are satisfied with the old wine; if we no longer expect surprises of grace to happen daily; then this is another day where we continue a spiritually dull spiritual life.

If, however, we can say *“It’s a new day, I am a new wineskin open to the new wine of the Kingdom; I will think differently about God today; I’ll be open to new things and attempt to do them; I’ll share this new wine whenever I get the chance. Today is all I have. Yesterday is gone, I will not be satisfied with yesterday’s discoveries or hold on to yesterday’s failures. Today is the never-to-be-repeated gift of the Lord.”*

We are all new wineskins by Jesus’ call and appointment to be His disciples. Now the only question is: *“Are we filled with old wine or new?”* Alleluia. Amen.