



TRYING TO MAKE A PATCH DO
Luke 5:36-39

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

William Powell Tuck

February 10, 2008

“Just who do you think you are?” they asked Jesus. “Just who do you think you are to break our traditions?” These were the kinds of questions Jesus began to receive. Too often we have sentimentalized our picture of Jesus and think that everybody liked him, praised him, and wanted to make him king. We often forget the crucifixion. Mark’s gospel tells us that it was John the Baptist’s disciples who began to ask Jesus that question: “Why do you break our traditions?” Matthew’s gospel records that it was Jesus’ disciples themselves who asked him. In Luke’s account the Pharisees are the ones who asked him this question. Most likely, at one time or another, all of them asked Jesus why he had broken their traditions.

Jesus responded to these questions, as he often did, with a parable. In fact, he gave them two very brief parables. One parable was simply about a patch on a coat. This probably indicates the poor background of the home life of Jesus. He, like many of us, grew up watching his mother put patches on garments and understood that kind of story. The other parable about the wineskin was also a familiar picture. The Palestinians did not use glass bottles and plastic bottles had not been invented in which they could store wine. They used the skins of animals. In the two parables, Jesus describes the nature of religion, which he had come to place in our hearts.

We Hold Onto the Old

One of the lessons we can learn from these parables is this: Too often we want to cling to the old and familiar, and we will not give way to the new. I can understand that difficulty, and you can, too. We all often prefer the old, familiar pathways. We like the old haunts and familiar vacation spots. We enjoy the restaurants, which we have been to that are tried and true. We all somehow or another like, desire, and want the old familiar places.

I remember a few Christmases ago when I got a new pair of bedroom shoes. It took me a long time to get use to the new pair because the old ones were so much more comfortable. I could slip into them so much easier than the new pair. That is sometimes our problem also with new shoes. The old shoes are really more comfortable, though they may not look like they should be worn anymore. But we usually enjoy them more because they are more comfortable and more familiar. I, like

many of you, like antiques. I think one of the reasons why I like antiques is that I understand the traditions out of which they come. I feel confident about antique furniture being made of solid wood. I understand the heritage behind them. Their familiarity gives me a sense of safety and security.

Carlyle Marney tells about a small boy who said to him one day: “Here I am seven years old and I really wished I was one-year-old.” Dr. Marney asked, “Why?” The boy responded: “If I was one-year-old, I could bite somebody and they couldn’t bite back.” There is a kind of safety and security in knowing something like that. We all often prefer the security of knowing that at a point we can do something and it is OK even if it is biting someone else. We know that at another stage in our life it will not be OK.

Moving is one of the experiences which often shatters the lives of so many people. You come into a new community and have to face people whom you don’t know, often being uprooted, and now you must find a new place to live. You are thrown into new surroundings, and have to start all over. Changing jobs can have a similar effect. For most people that produces tremendous trauma and difficulty. We long instead for the familiar, the secure, the known, and that which we can handle without tension, frustration, or difficulty. Retirement can be a similar experience.

Some of us are a bit like the Arab native who one night lit a candle in the darkness of his tent. He reached over and got a fig and opened it up and noticed that it had worms in it and he pitched it aside. He opened another one and noticed that it had worms in it and pitched it aside also. He did the same with the third. Thereupon he blew out the candle, and then reached over and got the fourth one and ate it.

Some of us, rather than face the unpleasant surrounding of a situation, simply had rather live in the darkness and go on. We prefer the familiar and secure rather than the unknown. But Jesus is telling us that this is not the kind of religion he is seeking to initiate. His religion comes as a disturbing force in the world. It is often revolutionary in its impact on our lives. It comes as a mighty disturbance to the status quo.

Harsh Words to the Religious

I think we need to understand that our religious traditions are often repugnant to the mind and spirit of God. Some of the harshest words Jesus ever spoke were leveled against the religious leaders. Note—not non-religious folks—but religious people. He said that some of the religious leaders had used ancient traditions in such a way that they placed them around the necks of people and these traditions had become a yoke that was crushing them to the ground and destroying them. The traditions had become like a millstone. You are a generation of vipers.”

“You are whitewashed tombs,” Jesus said. He declared that they were making it more difficult for people and not more liberating.

The More Significant Part of the Law

The children of Israel believed that they were God’s chosen people and they wanted to hold on to the past and their traditions. They continuously forgot: that God had blessed them to bless others. God’s blessing was not something they were just to keep for themselves. It was something that they were to share with others. They had tended to build a fence around their beliefs and their traditions. They had attempted to make their religion a closed system, and others were excluded. They began to teach that only those who were Jews could be the children of God. The laws, traditions, and interpretation of their relationship to God began to expand, and these soon became the weightier parts of what they emphasized in their religious practice. Jesus broke that way of thinking and challenged the whole legal system that the scribes and Pharisees had built and declared that they had chosen not the weightier part of the law, but the least essential and had lost that which was most important. Sometimes we commit the same kind of sin today.

We also seek to build our religion on our experience alone. “My experience with God is all I need,” we think. So we begin to build fences around that experience and exclude any other kind of new experiences that challenge us to new ways and new directions. We seem to declare: “The way I have experienced God is the way of coming to God.” We begin to make our own experience the only way of approaching God or understanding who and what God is. Jesus is telling us in these parables that you can’t contain God in the wineskins of old experiences, because God is constantly bursting them asunder with fresh insight, new breezes, open windows, open doors to bring new directions and new ways. God’s spirit is always going before us and pulling us into new avenues of serving God in the world today.

Several years ago, when I was a speaker for young people at Ridgecrest, I had finished speaking that day and a woman came up to me after the service and said: “Did I hear you say that after a person has become a Christian he needs to continue having experiences with Christ?” “Yes, that’s what I said,” I replied. “You can’t say that and be a Baptist,” she asserted. “Who says I can’t?” “I did and I am!” I responded. One of the very reasons I am a Baptist is because of the freedom we have to interpret the Scriptures as one is led by God.

Continuous Spiritual Growth

The heresy which she was seeking to put on me is the heresy we see too often with our denomination today. This heresy is the view that all one needs to do to be a Christian is to say yes to Jesus one time and our spiritual growth is over and

complete. There is no place in the New Testament where that is taught. The New Testament always speaks about new birth, new beginnings, new song, new commandment, and new life. Salvation is a place of newness. It is a place of new beginning and not a place of ending. The new birth indicates that one has become a new creature—a new creation by God. Following this experience, each of us is then growing, developing and being nurtured by God. We should be spiritually deeper and more mature today than we were yesterday, or we have not really understood what it is to be Christian. The Christian life is a call to a life of growth and openness to the freshness and newness, which God has before us.

All change produces some pain. In fact, it is unlikely that any real growth takes place in our lives without some pain in it. Most growth comes about by change, and almost all of us resist change in one way or another. Jesus is telling us very clearly in these parables that he has come to give us the freshness and vigor of a new way of life which challenges us to move forward as God's people in the world.

The Need to Be Flexible

Secondly, Jesus also tells us in these two parables that we need to be flexible. In Palestine, wine was put in the skins of some animals like a goat. Then the skin was covered with pitch, and the neck was secured so the wine would not spill out. As the wine would ferment, the skin, being new was flexible, would expand. The new skin could stand the strain caused by the wine. If one had an old skin which had become dry and someone put new wine into it and it began to ferment, of course, it would burst the skin and the wine would be lost. Jesus is saying that his gospel is the new wine. It could not be contained in the old skins of Judaism. He did not advocate that if one wanted to become a Christian, he or she must first become a Jew. His gospel exploded that old wineskin.

The Gospel Shatters Old Wineskins

Down through the centuries the gospel has continued to shatter old wineskins. It burst the wineskin of slavery and declared that all people before God are free people. It burst the wineskin of segregation and declared that before God all people are one. His gospel continues to burst old wineskins that linger with us. This gospel will burst the wineskins, which are trying to contain the rights of women today. It will one day burst that old wineskin so that women can have more freedom and equality with men in our day. It will burst the old wineskins of religious dogmatism. It will break the old wineskins of provincial religion. It will break the old wineskins that try to limit our understanding of God to ancient Greek metaphysical systems. It is breaking the old wineskins, which try to contain the way we speak about God or to God in some ancient language like the King James Version vocabulary.

Soon a new pastor will be called to serve this congregation. As significant and fine as the pastors in the past have been, this church cannot keep its eyes on the ministers in the past. The church cannot remain confined to the old wineskins of the past, no matter how great they may have been. It must now look to the future and how God will work through the new pastor who will offer a new “wineskin” with fresh leadership.

God is bursting these old wineskins and coming to us with the freshness, newness, and vitality of the divine presence. God is always the Creator, and God is still seeking to create us anew as individuals, God’s people, and as a church. God is always calling us to become more than we are. No old skins can ever contain the freshness of God’s spirit as it pervades our lives. Faith is always dynamic not static.

Change Is Often Met with Opposition

Change usually is met with opposition and difficulties. Who among us, if he or she is honest, would really want our medical doctors today to practice medicine like they did two hundred years ago? Did you know that almost every medical and scientific advance was met with continuous opposition? Galileo was banned as a heretic because of his scientific theories that the earth was not the center of the universe. Only in 1992, 350 years later, did the Catholic Church acknowledge that it had erred. That is a rather slow response! Pasteur met opposition from other medical doctors when he encouraged them to wash their hands before surgery and when he tried to introduce some inoculations to ward off disease. Lister also faced stiff opposition when he tried to get other doctors to use antiseptic methods when they performed surgery. When James Simpson introduced chloroform, almost no one would use it.

Down through the centuries, many scientific and medical discoveries have been opposed by many in society. When the automobile first began to come down the road, people laughed and joked about that noisy contraption. Following the airplane’s first flight, people ridiculed the Wright Brothers’ efforts and thought that it would not amount to anything. Few papers thought that first flight important enough to carry an article on the event. Today you and I see the progress which has been made, in many areas, and every single one of us in some way or another utilizes these scientific advances and discoveries.

A Call For Openness In Religion

It is interesting that in the realm of religion we often remain more closed minded and archaic than in any other areas. This area ought to be the one where we are the most open to new truth. God, who is the creator of life, is continuously opening us to freshness, vitality, new insights, and new direction. No one can ever

say, “I have all the truth about God”; or “I have built a fence around God, and I know all about God”; or “I understand everything about the Scriptures, and I know exactly how one can describe God”; or “Here are the ten theological tenets in which one understands what God is like.” Blowing across the world are desires for changes in many areas. Jesus would remind us again about the God, who cannot be contained in old wineskins, who is forever revealing the divine self with freshness and vitality.

A Gospel of Joy

In the third place, Jesus is also telling us in this parable that the gospel is a gospel of joy. He responded in these parables to the criticism which some had directed against him when they accused him of drinking and eating too much with his friends. “Why are you not more respectful in your religious practice?” “Why are you not more sad?” they seemed to ask. Jesus used the analogy of the bridegroom to tell them that while the bridegroom is present, rejoicing and feasting are the order of the day. The wine of his presence has burst the old wineskins and has given joy and invigoration. His gospel is volatile. It explodes old systems. It comes to us with a freshness, which is filled with joy and hope.

It is good news, and the good news is that we as individuals do not have to remain as we are, and we as a church do not have to remain as we are. God is constantly coming into our lives to reveal to us the possibility of newness for us as individuals and as a church. We do not have to remain in depression, or loneliness, or sin, or frustration, or anger, or indecisiveness as individuals. We do not have to remain divided with another or in controversy with other people. We can find the freshness of God’s spirit, which brings God’s love and grace into our lives, and transform us to experience anew the joy of God’s presence.

Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” “I have come that your joy might be made full.” Jesus said, “I have not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it.” He fills it full with meaning. He has come to keep that which in the law is worth preserving. In the Shema we read that “the Lord our God is one.” Jesus attempted to preserve that which was old and worthy of saving.

A New Creation

Jesus also came to shatter the superficial and mundane. His work brought newness of life. Remember that Jesus Christ did not come simply to reform but to transform. He did not come simply to mend us but to remake us. He did not come simply to make some minor corrections but to bring about a new creation. We as individuals and as a church need to be a part of the new creation of God. That means, if we are the children of the new creation, the children of the new birth, the children

of the new song, the children of the new commandment, the children of the new hope, we remain open and related to God's spirit which is continuously giving us new avenues for ministry, new opportunities for service, and new visions for acting and ministering as God's people.

Soren Keirkegaard was a noted Danish philosopher of the nineteenth century. He has an interesting parable about a preaching goose. A goose is probably a good analogy for a lot of preachers. In this parable a goose is flying over a barnyard one day and notices that the dirty lot is filled with geese. He stops and gathers a crowd in the barnyard and begins to preach to them. He reminds the geese gathered before him in the barnyard of the adventures of their forefathers who flew the trackless skies in years past. He challenged them not to be content with their confined earthbound existence behind the wooden fence. He told them about the Creator who had made their life and had given them wings so they could migrate great distances. All this pleased the geese and they nodded their heads in approval. When he finished his sermon, all the geese applauded the sermon and spoke about the wonderful eloquence of the preaching goose. But they did not leave the barnyard. They returned to their corn and the security of the barnyard. They did not fly out of the barnyard. They remained there.

Lift Our Vision

God has called us as individuals to lift our vision beyond the immediate. God admonishes us to lift our vision to what we can become as God's people. There are always those who want to build fences around our visions and look down or look back. But God is calling us to look ahead—to look forward at what we can be. The gospel we received from Jesus is always fresh, new, and vital. Jesus challenges us to lift our wings and fly into new realms of service and creativity.

Jesus is giving you an opportunity to decide today. Do you want your religion merely to be a patch on an old religious garment of your own design or will you be open to the radically new grace he offers? Are you going to close your mind to God and assume you have already learned all you can from him or will you remain open and responsive to God however God comes into your life? Will you settle for religious tradition and clichés instead of a real, vital and joyous faith? Why settle for the stale and mundane when Christ offers you new life and radiant joy? The choice is yours.

I hope that we shall choose to be open to God and not be old wineskins. Jesus has already told us what happens to the old wineskins—they are burst asunder by the new wine. Let's be open to him and the direction that he is seeking to take us. His call is to go forward. The choice is yours.

Eternal God, we come acknowledging that too often we do cling too strongly to the old and to the familiar and are unwilling to let go and launch into the sea that is before us. Give us courage as Your people to hear Your voice and to be able to discern what is Your direction and what is our own. Through Christ we pray. Amen. ■

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, You have loved us from all eternity. We are conscious that we live in a world created by Your spirit. We are aware that it will take eye, ear, heart and the totality of our being for us to live in this world. So, grant that we will commit our, lives fully to You so that we might find our rightful place as Your servants.

We are conscious also that we live in a very busy world. Sometimes our busyness keeps us from serving You effectively. Our busyness at home sometimes keeps us from hearing the needs of those around us. Our concerns about those things outside of our home cause us not to hear their needs. May we listen to our wives or husbands or children or other members of our family. Enable us to know how to attune our lives so that we can learn to be responsive and seek to meet these needs. Sometimes our busyness in our jobs distracts us from doing our work, as we should. We pray that we will learn not simply to bury ourselves in busyness but to find the meaning of life and why we are here as persons.

We confess also that sometimes our busyness within our church keeps us from being about Your real work in the world. We become so distracted with trivialities and keeping things straight and orderly that we have, missed our calling to be Your children in the world. Enable us, we pray, to sense what Your real work is all about as we seek to love and serve You effectively.

We see change all around us in the world, but we confess that we do not really like change very much. Forgive us when we resist new ideas, new thoughts, and new ways. Grant, O God, that we may not seek so much to cling to the past as to be open and responsive to the freedom of Your spirit, which can come in such a variety of ways.

We bring to you now those in our church family who are ill, who have heavy burdens or who are grieving. Sustain them with Your shepherding grace. Touch our spirits now as we open them unto You. Through Jesus Christ, our eternal Lord, we pray. Amen.