

Faith in Old Bags?

Mark 2:18-22

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When the only great-grandmother I ever knew passed away at 85, my parents told me she died from hardening of the arteries. For a 9 year old kid it was pretty scary to discover that arteries could get hard; “Someone can die from that?” I remember asking my parents whether my arteries were going to get hard? My mother said, “No, Robert. They only get hard when your old. You don’t have to worry about that.”

Years later I learned that what my parents called “hardening of the arteries” is actually “atherosclerosis,” one of the ways heart disease manifests. It occurs when fat & cholesterol deposits build up in the walls of arteries, causing plaque blockages that stop the flow of blood. But my mother was wrong saying young people don’t need to worry about it. Studies of autopsies performed on young soldiers who died in the Korean War, the Vietnam war, and in the battles of Afghanistan and Iraq reveal that seemingly healthy young men were actually sicker than though knew. 25% of the young soldiers already had serious buildup of plaque and were well on their way to having a heart attack in the next 20-30 years. Other studies suggest that the percentages are the same regardless of gender.

What we know is that this old fashioned phrase—“hardening of the arteries”—captures something significant. Atherosclerosis creeps up on us because of habits we develop over the years—unhealthy habits concerning what we eat, how we exercise, whether we smoke, our love for fried food, and the list goes on. When it happens, it *physically* makes a future heart attack and death *far more likely*. And when it happens to us *spiritually* it can lead to exactly what we hear happening in 4 stories Mark tells that epitomize what Jesus saw as his life’s mission to counteract the kind of religion that squeezes the life out of faith. We heard one of those stories read aloud followed by two short parables that sum up his diagnosis of what was the spiritual atherosclerosis of religious practice in his day.

But there were four stories with the moral of the story found in the center of it all. These stories told early in the Gospel of Mark take us from the first story of resistance to Jesus’ ministry and message right up to the moment the religious leaders decided that Jesus needed to die. Better that he dies, they said, than to let him dare to continue to challenge everything they held sacred. That’s the way they had it figured. Who was this guy to think he had a right to challenge the time-honored traditions of how true faith should be practiced? How dare him.

- In the 1st story these leaders approach Jesus’ disciples because they are disturbed to see that Jesus was willing to go into the homes of tax collectors and other sinners and sit down and eat with them. What? It’s not just food that can be un-Kosher they said. A Rabbi should never eat with un-Kosher people either—even if they were Jews! Truly Godly people just don’t associate with people who don’t practice a Kosher lifestyle. What was Jesus’s problem they demanded to know? If he was a rabbi, why was he breaking the KOSHER rules?
- In the 2nd story, the one we heard read, these same leaders come to Jesus and want to know why he isn’t teaching his disciples how to become more Holy like John the

Baptist was teaching his followers? Holy people fast from food and practice cleanliness rules to prove just how holy they are. That's what holiness should look like! Your disciples, they said, think that potlucks make them holy? As if they can just eat whatever someone offers them? They're just unclean sinners, not the kind of holy acolytes that are true followers of a rabbi!

- The 3rd story has these same religious leaders coming to Jesus, this time demanding that he make his disciples stop working on the Sabbath. How dare the followers of a rabbi set such a poor example! They have six days a week they can glean harvest grain from the edge of a crop field. BUT. NOT. ON. THE. SABBATH! Let them glean on the day before. "It's ungodly to see them doing such things on the Sabbath. Stop them from acting in ungodly ways, Jesus! That's your job as a rabbi!"
- In the 4th story they watch to see if Jesus was getting the message that he better clean up his act. Would he dare to heal a man **On The Sabbath**? When he just as easily could return and do it the following day? Who does he think he is, purposefully daring them to do something because he breaks their sacred traditions? But Jesus, well he had no patience for their religiosity. He healed the man.

That was the final straw. Mark says the religious leaders conspired with the Herodians to figure out how to put Jesus down like a dog with rabies. They didn't want the contagion to spread any further. Jesus had set a direct collision that challenged everything they held sacred. They made a pact to put a stop it.

For his part, Jesus had rather pointed things to say to each of their so-called rules of holiness:

- As for sharing meals with sinners: "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."
- As for fasting to prove holiness: "There is a time and place for fasting; when the time comes that fasting is the right response, they'll fast."
- As for my Sabbath observances: "The Sabbath was made for the good of people, not the people for the good of the Sabbath."
- As for healing the handicapped on the Sabbath: "Is it right to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to let someone die to protect your tradition?"

Of course, the irony is that's exactly what Israel's religious leaders decided to do: Kill Jesus rather than let him make a mockery of everything they held sacred.

Taken together these pithy sayings all make the same point: God's grace can't be bottled up in anyone's sacred traditions. That kind of religion, in the name of worshipping God, has no room for mercy and grace except for people just like them. That's what those two little illustrative parables that Mark puts at the heart of the matter teach:

- "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."

Even though very few of us actually sew anymore, we still know that clothing can shrink. Mostly, we think about this is a delicate fabric gets washed with the wrong load. Or when we

buy clothing and have to think about whether it will be too small on us once its washed. So, if its 100% cotton, buy a little big so it can shrink, right? In the first century, when people still sewed their own garments, this was just an issue of what goes wrong if you try to graft something *new* onto something *old*. It just won't work. At least not unless you take precautions! And to put *new*, unfermented wine into an *old* wineskin that had already expanded to permit the fermenting process of a previous batch of wine—well, sit back and wait, cause **that old bag** is going to... explode.

Don't try to fit God's new thing into something that is already hidebound with sacred rules and regulations. If you do, the heart attack is inevitable. Old tried and true ways of practicing holiness and making church happen too often can be a case of hardening of the arteries just waiting to happen. And good church people can find themselves playing the part of the Pharisees rather than the part of Jesus' disciples. You've seen it happen in otherwise good Christian churches, haven't you?

There were 2 young women in a church who gave birth within weeks of one another. One was a young professional couple who came to the congregation when the pastor had officiated at their wedding. The professionals were folded into the life of the congregation over the intervening years and now that young woman's 1st child was born. The second woman, well she grew up in the church. She was NOT a professional person. In fact, she was a renegade, 17-year-old unwed mother who only came to church now and again.

A member of the congregation wanted to dedicate a special song to the good child.

"What about the other child? Could you sing it for both of them?" the pastor asked.

She shook her head "No. No." Unspoken was the claim: "What kind of message would that send to our church children if we treat these women the same?"

The battle sides were pitched and God's grace went down to defeat. Why, because the woman who wanted to sing to the precious Kosher baby decided that she wouldn't compromise and sing to an unKosher one. So, the song was never shared, but grace took the hit. How easy it is to forget that Jesus had no patience for people who turn the gospel into an insidious reversal of seeking out people like themselves rather than welcoming people who fear the roof might fall in on them if they bring their broken and messy lives to church.

Jesus was treated as if he was a traitor to the cause of God in these stories because he saw people as more important than sacred traditions. He came to force **a showdown between a religion of rules and a movement of mercy**. And in our day, if we are followers of Jesus, that comes down to whether a church welcomes the worried, the weary, the wastrels, and the weak, OR shoos them away by an ostentatious practice of their own Sabbath certainties leaves little room for people who aren't as Kosher as they are. The challenge the church has faced down through the ages is the very human tendency to try to place holiness in a box *of their own construction*; not God's.

Retired Chaplain to the US Senate, Rev. Lloyd Ogilvie, tells the story of some American tourists in the Middle-East who were sharing their testimonies with an Israeli audience—stories of how God had transformed their lives by faith. He said one woman tested the limits of the interpreter's ability to translate American colloquialisms. She testified that she was so weighed down in all of her certainties at one point in her life, that everyone just called her "the old bag" because she was so inflexible. But then Christ transformed her, she said. By his grace, she said, the "old bag" became "a new bag." The translator paused on this odd American phrase—"old bag"—

and, finally, translated it with the Middle-Eastern equivalent. He used the Hebrew word for an “old wineskin” for the idea that someone could be an “old bag.” The audience laughed.

One of the cable news show hosts likes to do a bit called **Thing 1 and Thing 2**. The fact that we can all become old bags when it comes to our cherished sacred practices is a given written across the pages of the Bible. **That’s thing 1. Here’s thing 2.** When your new pastor arrives, will she or he be granted the right to shake things up enough to offer love, acceptance, and forgiveness for all the unKosher people who need God’s grace and mercy? Will church be held for the beleaguered or for the benefactors? Will you be willing to support what may seem like unusual ventures that redefine what it means to be part of this congregation?

What would that look like? Pastor and author Jerry Cook was struggling to figure out why his Gresham Oregon congregation was *growing*. What was he doing? Before he came as pastor it had been a congregation that was just getting old and was losing members. But that was turning around. All because one member had challenged the church to let the new pastor try some “**saddle-soap**” on how they did things around there. “We need you to rub on some Saddle-soap to this old church,” the congregation told that pastor when they called him. And the church committed themselves to try it. “Help us become more flexible again, pastor.” They didn’t want to be a bunch of old bags.

So, Pastor Cook was trying to figure out what his Saddle-Soap ministry really meant when he received a telephone call from a fellow Gresham pastor. That minister was upset because several parishioners had started attending the congregation Cook pastored. At one point the man became so frustrated he told Pastor Cook, “You know what you are over there? You’re church is nothing but a bunch of garbage collectors!”

Cook says he hung up *reeling* from that stinging rebuke. But then he realized that the pastor had aptly summarized their congregation’s new mission. There is no shame in being the kind of church that attracts the hurting, the helpless, and the hapless. In fact, these were precisely the kind of people Jesus sought out at dinner parties with sinners and people whose lives were misshapen by tragedies: “**It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners,**” he said. The congregation Cook pastored had once been on its way to heart attack, because it had developed *hardening of the arteries*. But they made a commitment to let the SADDLE SOAP of God’s grace transform **what they held sacred and what they thought was Kosher**. They wanted to be a church filled with grace and mercy. That’s what they had been when they once were vibrant. Could they have the grace to let that happen again?

What can God do with people who are willing to break through their hide-bound sacred arteries, encrusted by traditions and pieties? The Bible and the Spirit says that for people who commit themselves to the God’s grace—they can do.... **the kingdom of God**. Even in Issaquah. What it takes is the saddle-soap of God’s grace and truly trusting the work of the church to God’s Spirit *‘til the work on earth is done*.

Amen?

Amen.