

“The Taste of New Wine”

Mark 2:18-22 ¹

The Iron Curtain has officially been down since 1991, but things haven't changed for everybody. While the Iron Curtain stood, a strong fence separated two populations of red deer living in the forests encompassing the border between Germany and what is now the Czech Republic.

When government officials began to dismantle the fence in 1989, the physical barrier between those deer populations was removed. But when wildlife biologists began studying the deer thirteen years later, they quickly realized that the deer living in Germany were not migrating into the Czech Republic, and the deer living in the Czech Republic were not migrating into Germany. In other words, both populations of deer were still behaving as if the fence still blocked their path.

One particular deer has become symbolic of this entire population. Her name is Ahornia, and her movements in the forests of eastern Germany were tracked for several years by a GPS collar fitted to her neck. During the years she was monitored, Ahornia's location was tracked more than 11,000 times in Germany—but not a single time in the Czech Republic. She was tracked at the border of the two countries several times, but she never crossed over.

Two elements of Ahornia's story are particularly noteworthy. First, she was born 18 years after the destruction of the fence that comprised the Iron Curtain. She has no personal memory of the fence, and yet she is still blocked by it. Second, the land formerly occupied by the fence and its guard towers has now been turned into a large and thriving nature preserve. In other words, the land “beyond the fence” has become a perfect home for deer like Ahornia and her family—and yet she will not cross over.

Biologists have come up with several explanations for Ahornia's strange behavior, but the most poignant one is this: “The wall in the head is still there.”² Hold that thought.

Once when John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, some people came to Jesus and asked, “Why don't your disciples fast like John's disciples and the Pharisees do?”

Jesus replied, “Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can't fast while the groom is with them. But someday the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

“Besides, who would patch old clothing with new cloth? For the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before.

“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins” (Mark 2:18-22).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 20, 2016. Parallel passages include Matthew 9:14-17; Luke 5:33-39.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² “Deep in the Forest, Bambi Remains the Cold War's Last Prisoner,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11.4.09.

I imagine that you're quite familiar with this scene. Challenged about the unconventional behavior of His disciples, Jesus used two short parables to clarify the difference between what His critics were expecting and what God actually intended.

Jesus' first example had to do with patching a garment using unshrunk cloth. Anyone with experience in such matters knows that new cloth will shrink when it's washed, making an even larger tear in the repaired fabric. Rather than repairing the old, the new will destroy it.

The second example made the same point using the metaphor of "new wine." When Jesus used this illustration, wine had to be stored and fermented in specially-prepared animal skins. Fresh skins were still elastic enough to contain the pressure created by fermentation, but like many other things, the skins became brittle as they aged. Everyone knew that skins could hold new wine only once.

Through the advantage of hindsight, we have little trouble understanding Jesus' main point, but when Luke recorded this conversation, he included a very interesting statement that both Matthew and Mark chose to leave out. In Luke's account, Jesus concluded His answer by noting that "***no one who drinks the old wine seems to want the new wine. 'The old is just fine,' they say***" (Luke 5:39). I think that this sentence may be the most important part of Jesus' answer, so let's sit with it for a few minutes.

It was common knowledge then, as it is now, that aged wine has a more robust flavor than new wine does, and is thus more desirable. The point in both examples is that Jesus was doing a new and wonderful thing, and that "new containers" would be required in order to receive and to experience the power of this New Thing.

Jesus' critics were arguing for "proper procedure" without realizing that their procedures missed the main point of what God was doing before their very eyes. They failed to recognize the incredibly new kind of relationship with God that Jesus offered.

This ancient conversation supplied the title for Keith Miller's classic book, *The Taste of New Wine*.³ Perhaps you've read it. Published in 1965, the book took American evangelicalism by storm. Miller argued that faith is not something that exists separately from the rest of our lives, but rather is something that transforms our lives thoroughly and completely. Miller contended that genuine faith doesn't have nearly as much to do with "correct doctrine" or "proper procedure" as it does with "personal fellowship with the living God."⁴

Miller confessed that "suddenly I realized that there are no small decisions—since every deciding either takes one closer to or further from God's will."⁵ "I realized that God does not want [our] money, nor does He primarily want [our] time . . . He wants [our] will; and if you give Him your *will*, He'll begin to show you life as you've never seen it before. It is like being born again."⁶

My friends, our concern this morning is not a matter of something God did two thousand years ago, or even fifty years ago; God continues to this very day to bring into being a New Reality through the life and power of Jesus in us, and by God's own choice, this New Reality continues to

³ Keith Miller, *The Taste of New Wine* (Waco: Word, 1965). When he wrote this book, Miller was Director of Laity Lodge, a well-known retreat center in the hill country of Texas. Some years ago, when I was leaving the faculty of Southern Seminary, Laity Lodge asked me to consider becoming their Director, but I declined in favor of returning to the local church, which has always been my passion.

⁴ Miller, p. 17.

⁵ Miller, p. 57.

⁶ Miller, p. 39.

be birthed within the “wineskins” of the Church. The challenge that you and I face today is the same one that the religious leaders of Jesus’ day faced: this “new wineskins” thing means change, and change tends to be both difficult and uncomfortable.

Like those ancients, we, too, are tempted to say “the old is just fine.” The old is familiar. It feels safer. It’s less trouble. The truth of the matter is that as we grow older nearly everyone develops an increasing dislike of that which is new and unfamiliar.

Left to ourselves, we tend to grow more and more unwilling to make any adjustments in our habits and ways of life, wanting to coast into the sunset doing things “as we’ve always done them.” The taste of “new wine” continues to be sharp, not mellow. We may find the old and familiar to be “just fine,” and yet it continues to be the new to which Jesus calls us.

What I’m about to say is not a political statement one way or the other. But when we say that Jesus is not simply a “reformer” but a “transformer,” the emotional impact of that reality may be captured by the distress you’re feeling if you voted for the Democratic ticket last week.

If you “voted for Hillary,” the shock and distress you’re feeling is probably a lot like what the religious leaders of Jesus’ day felt when they heard Him preach. God is neither Democrat nor Republican, nor American, either; but I suspect that the emotional disruption Jesus’ hearers were feeling in this conversation was quite similar to the disruption many of us are feeling this morning.

That pain may help us hear Jesus’ point more fully, because from that day to this, the perpetual challenge for religious folk has always been distinguishing the new wine from the wineskins. The forms and practices of religion that serve so well in one generation tend to become impediments for the next.

Our own congregation was birthed “as a new kind of church in a new kind of city,” and we have a goodly heritage that continues to be worth celebrating. At the same time, we can’t go back to the CBF of 1973, good as it was. The message of redemption through Jesus, while old and tested, tried and true, still must be reinterpreted, refocused, and reapplied in every generation. If it is to change the world, the message of Jesus must become “new wine” for each generation, even though we’d frequently be more comfortable if that wine were just turned back into water.

We can’t go back to 1973. It’s a mistake to say or to think, “If 1973 ever comes around again, our church will be ready.” But we can ask what it was that attracted us to this place in 1973, and whether that something still exists and can find life once more.

As we sit here this morning, we in CBF are in an “in-between time.” Our congregation is beginning to wrestle with the question of “What do we do now?” in the context of Pastor Neville’s departure and in the context of last week’s election.

In-between times are anxious times. There’s always a tendency to say what Israel said in the desert that lay between Egypt and the Promised Land: “Let’s go back to Egypt. Things were better there” (Numbers 14:1-4). But, like Israel, we can’t go back. While our message never changes, old methods seldom work in new times; and more change happens now in ten years than happened in entire centuries not very long ago. Leonard Sweet, a church strategist, often reminds his readers that **“You can count on this: what works today won’t work tomorrow.”**⁷

⁷ Leonard Sweet, *AQUAchurch* (Loveland, CO: Group, 1999), pp. 210-211.

As some of our CJC friends lamented last week's election, they said a few days ago that "Everything I've worked for my whole life is going down the drain." While that certainly may be how things *feel*, that's not really how things *are*. But it may in fact be true that changes are coming that will negatively affect the most vulnerable among us.

Our community continues to be full of "invisible" people: persons who are disabled; persons who work in menial jobs; persons who don't speak English very well. What are we doing to discover, to befriend, and to encourage these forgotten ones? What might we do? How could we use our educational power, our economic power, and our political power to bless them?

In his fascinating book, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*,⁸ Robert Lewis suggested that the early Christians changed their world through what he called an **irrefutable incarnation**. In those early centuries—in A.D. 165 and again in A.D. 251, to be exact—two great plagues swept the Roman Empire, killing a third of the population each time.

According to historian Rodney Stark, "the willingness of Christians to care for [their neighbors] was put on dramatic public display. . . . Pagans tried to avoid all contact with the afflicted, often casting the still-living into the gutters. Christians, on the other hand, nursed the sick, even though [some] died doing so. . . . Even in healthier times, the pagan emperor, Julian, noted that the followers of The Way 'support not only their poor, *but ours as well*.'"⁹

When they got it right, the early Church was passionately committed to Jesus and to the proclamation of salvation through Him. They were people of winsome lifestyles characterized by unusually high moral standards, and they gave themselves to radically selfless good deeds that amazed their friends and neighbors.¹⁰ It was an irrefutable incarnation, indeed.¹¹

In one of his books, Leonard Sweet remembered that "As a child in the 1950s, I heard a story at a . . . revival meeting in New York. It seems a certain missionary, home on leave, was shopping for a globe of the world to take back to her mission station. The clerk showed her an inexpensive globe and another one with a light bulb inside. 'This one is nicer,' the clerk said, pointing to the illuminated globe, 'but of course, a lighted world costs more.'"¹²

That's what Kingdom living is all about: lighting our world with tangible expressions of the love of Jesus—with irrefutable incarnation. We need to ask ourselves a series of tough questions: What are our unique strengths as a church? What are the critical issues of our community? Which of those can our church effectively influence? Do we have a structure that can move our people out to those needs?

Are we willing to commit resources, staff, and people to make an impact, remembering that "a lighted world costs more"? Our next chapter of ministry together will doubtless be costly in many ways. But it will also be very, very exciting!

⁸ Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 13-14.

⁹ Quoted in Lewis, pp. 45-46.

¹⁰ Lewis, p. 74.

¹¹ That's what Jesus was talking about when He said, "*You are the light of the world—like a city [or a church] on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father*" (Matthew 5:14-16, NLT).

¹² Sweet, p. 47.

Bob Buford has noted that “when church leaders develop a heart for their cities, everything changes in how they view their calling and mission. They develop a *kingdom* mindset more than a *church* mindset. [This mindset] calls them to deploy their resources of time, energy, people, and dollars into what I call a ‘50/50 church.’ This is a church where over half its resources are directed outward rather than inward.

“Many reluctant leaders [are afraid that such a] shift will eventuate in the weakening of the local congregation. Wise leaders know that the opposite is true. **Following Christ’s call to mission leads to strength.**”¹³

As we continue our congregational discernment in this in-between time, let’s continue to nurture a willingness to let God transform us and draw us toward the future that God intends. Let’s continue to search out our congregation’s unique strengths and seek to discern where those strengths match the critical needs of our community. Let’s dare to imagine that God might once again do something amazing through us here at CBF.

We have a saying that “If you keep on doing what you’ve always done, you’re going to keep on getting what you’ve always gotten.” The message of the new wineskins is that God is not in the “what you’ve always gotten” business, and we probably need to ask God to show us where we still have “walls in our heads.”

It was for such “new wine” adventures that F. B. Meyer wrote, “Be not afraid to trust God completely. As you go down the long corridor, you may find that He has preceded you and locked many doors that you would have entered in vain. But be sure that beyond these there is one that He has left unlocked. Open it and enter, and you will find yourself face to face with . . . the river of opportunity, broader and deeper than anything you had dared to imagine in your sunniest dreams. Launch forth on it, for it leads to the open sea.”¹⁴

¹³ Bob Buford, in foreword to Lewis, p. 12.

¹⁴ F. B. Meyer, *Life of Paul: A Servant of Jesus Christ* (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1995), p. 69.