

Blessed are the Flexible

Mark 2:13-22
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In the year 1530, astronomer Copernicus – a century before Galileo – caused absolute chaos in both the church and society when he asserted the earth wasn't only round, but it rotated on its axis once a day, and traveled around the sun once a year. Beyond its scientific implications, many believe that perhaps the greatest impact of this discovery was on the human ego. Why? Because, if the earth wasn't the center of the universe, then maybe humankind wasn't either.

Another cause of furor in church and society erupted in 1859 when Charles Darwin introduced the concept that populations evolve over the course of generations through a process of natural selection. **There are countless other examples throughout history of how new ideas and ways of thinking ran into the brick wall of orthodoxy and traditionalism.**

So how did the Church respond? Like it always does when the status quo is challenged and threatened, when new ideas are too big to fit within the small box of its own understanding. The Church responded with swift and harsh condemnation! Within the past 60 years we have continued to witness many whole-hearted church efforts to condemn new scientific ideas, new theological perspectives, and new ways of ordering society. Much of that condemnation has been hurled at those who have been advocates for equality among all people: racial equality, gender equality, sexual identity equality. You know, advocates like you and me, and like College Hill.

I want to say two examples from just this past week. I attended the 9th Annual John Hope Franklin Reconciliation in America National Symposium right here in Tulsa. It was entitled, "The DNA of Reconciliation." I'll have much more to say about this in the future, but **the work of reconciliation (especially in the shadow of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre – and yes it was a massacre, not a riot) is fraught with the tension between the old and new.** There's not only continuing conflict between our predominantly white culture and people of color, but also between the old and new within the African-American community itself on how to move forward. Another example this past week was the festivities associated with **Tulsa Pride.** New and old understandings of sexual orientation continue to cause uproar in church and society, even though great strides have been made.

As progressive Christians, however, we are also tempted to fall into the trap of thinking that because we have accepted many new ideas about science, the Bible, and the role of the church, that we would never be so narrow-minded. But it's not just about open-mindedness, it's also about the ability to accept change in any form. **Regardless of how progressive we may consider ourselves, do we not also still fall into certain routines of behavior and thought, even here at the church in how we worship, how we fellowship, etc.? Human nature tends toward believing that after we do something or think something the same way for a certain period of time, it becomes all but sacred to us. So yes, even we can confuse what has become routine with the attitude that it is the "right" way to act or think or believe.** It really is true: people do not

particularly like change. But **if we have learned anything from Darwin's theory of evolution it's this: Nothing ever stays the same. And as people of faith, we connect the dots to declare that it is God who is the author of diversity and change.**

Regardless, I think it's safe to say that God certainly shook things up a lot through the new teachings and ministry of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had a habit of breaking with tradition and routine, cultural as well as religious. He had the nerve to hang around with the kind of people that good religious folks just weren't supposed to mix with. Jesus and his followers even had the gall to put on public displays of joy and celebration, when others, like the Pharisees (and even the disciples of John the Baptist) solemnly fasted – restraining from food and frivolity. It reminds me of an old definition of a Puritan: A Puritan was a person who was desperately afraid that someone, somewhere, was having fun.

In today's Scripture passage from the gospel of Mark, Jesus uses the occasion to warn his disciples about the problems created by an inflexible and closed mind – a mind that refuses to even consider, let alone learn and accept new things. **Jesus warns them that an old small box will not readily hold new big ideas. Jesus could have come up with a new beatitude, such as: "Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not tear or be broken."** Instead, Jesus used a couple of common, ordinary images, as was his style, to get his message across.

Jesus stated, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment." Why? What happens to unshrunk cloth when it gets wet? It shrinks, of course. Some of us are old enough to remember buying blue jeans in the days before preshrunk cotton? You had to make sure they fit like a sack so that after you washed them for the first time you could still button them, and so that they wouldn't come half way up your leg (we called those "high water pants"). Likewise, if an unshrunk patch of cloth is sewn onto an already shrunken piece of clothing, it will tear and ruin the garment when it becomes wet. Our mothers knew to wash patches first before patching our clothes. (By the way, do people still patch clothes?)

The lesson: New patches on old garments are dangerous if not incompatible. Most likely, this analogy was used by the early church in Mark's day to apply to how **new forms of religious practice and new theological ways of understanding God caused conflict with those that held to the old ways of thinking and doing.**

Mark also writes that Jesus used another proverb-like saying, "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (v. 22). In Jesus' day, wine was kept in wineskins, which was a pouch made out of animal hides. There was no such thing as a wine bottle in our modern sense of the term. When these skins were new they had a certain elasticity and flexibility. As they grew old they became stiff and unyielding. New wine continues to ferment. It gives off gases, and these gases expand and cause pressure. (This is our science lesson for today.) If the wineskin is new, it is elastic enough to take the pressure. But if it is old, therefore rigid and inflexible, it will burst. Both the wine and the wineskin will be ruined.

Jesus was trying to teach the staunch, legalistic religious leaders of his day that he and his teachings were like that new patch of cloth and that new wine. Conflict with the 'establishment', with those that held firmly to tradition and to the ways that things were always done and believed, was therefore inevitable. **What Jesus teaches his disciples, and us, is the necessity of being flexible, willing to change, willing to stretch, willing to be open-minded, willing to reform old ways of thinking and doing that no**

longer contribute to the good of church and society. Yes, there needs to be a willingness within the church to bend and stretch to meet its current needs, the needs of the community and an ever-changing culture. That is part of the very definition of being progressive. Notice, however, this doesn't mean that we must become like the culture or that everything old is bad, but rather to be flexible enough in order to meet the needs of the community in which we serve. Otherwise, we become irrelevant. And this, according to many experts, is what seems to be happening within all the mainline denominations in the 21st century. That's why over the past decade there has been an explosion of new thinking often put under the heading of the emerging church, or the missional church movements. Presbyterians have a new approach called the NEXT Conference which seeks to explore and even innovate change within our denomination and our congregations.

So how can we apply all this teaching to our own lives? Perhaps it begins by asking if there are there any habits, traditions, or beliefs that you or I are holding onto so tightly that we are putting up resistance to the work of God's Spirit in our lives? We, as a congregation, can apply all of this to College Hill as well. Are we being open and flexible enough to deal with all the newness that God and our culture is bringing to this congregation?

Yes, change is always accompanied with resistance. But the question remains, will we continue to be flexible enough not to tear at our seams? So perhaps the beatitude most appropriate for College Hill continues to be: "**Blessed are the flexible, for they are pliable in the hands of God.**"

Amen.