

Matthew 9:1-17  
New Wine, New Wineskins  
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Some of you have heard me say this before, but I will say it again: some of the best spiritual conversations I have come in the least likely places. Most recently one came at the new venue Wings Etc., over chicken wings and Yuenglings. After an event a group of people were gathered there, and in the course of the conversation I mentioned my deep gratitude and love for Eugene Peterson. Eugene was a pastor and writer who is a Pastor's Pastor and someone who continues to help form my vocational imagination.

From that conversation a new gathering has begun between me and two local youth pastors. We meet monthly at my house over turkey sandwiches, Doritos, and Diet Coke read, discuss, and be nurtured in our callings by the writings of Eugene.

Currently, we are reading his memoir *The Pastor*, a book I would commend to all of you. It is pure gold. I wanted to share one of my favorite excerpts from that book with you.

Eugene writes: I grew up in a Christian home with good parents. I was told the story of Jesus and instructed in the right way to live. I was loved and treated well. Then I went off to school and discovered what the Gospel of John calls "the world"--those people who do not regard God with either reverence or obedience. This knowledge came into my life in the person of Garrison Johns, the school bully. Garrison (not his actual name) lived in a log house a couple of hundred yards beyond where I lived, the yard littered with rusted-out trucks and cars.

Eventually, Garrison discovered me and took me on as his project for the year and gave me a working knowledge of what 25 years later Richard Niebuhr would articulate as--the tension between Christ and culture. I had been taught in Sunday school not to fight and so had never learned to use my fists. I had been prepared for the wider world of neighborhood and school by memorizing "Bless those who persecute you" and "Turn the other cheek." I don't know how Garrison Johns knew that about me--some sixth sense that bullies have, I suppose--but he picked me for his sport. Most afternoons after school he would catch me and beat me up. He also found out that I was a Christian and taunted me with "Jesus-sissy."

I loved going to school--I was learning a lot, finding new friends, adoring my teacher. The classroom was a wonderful place. But after the dismissal bell each day I had to face Garrison Johns and get my daily beating.

March came. There were still patches of snow here and there, but the days were getting longer--I was no longer walking home in the dark. And then something unexpected happened. I was with my neighborhood friends on this day, seven or eight of them, when Garrison caught up with us and started in on me, jabbing and taunting, working himself up to the main event.

That's when it happened--something totally uncalculated, totally out of character. Something snapped in me. The Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on

his chest and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn't believe it--he was helpless under me. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good and I hit him again--blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on. "Black his eyes! Bust his teeth!"

I said to Garrison, "Say 'Uncle.'" He wouldn't say it. I hit him again. More blood, More cheering. Now the audience was bringing the best out of me. And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, "Say, 'I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.'" And he said it. Garrison Johns was my first convert.

Garrison Johns was my introduction into the world, the "world" that "is not my home." He was also my introduction to how effortlessly that same "world" could get into me, making itself at home under cover of my Christian language and "righteous" emotions.

The Scriptures are a vast collection of not just sayings that guide our actions, but God's Word is a vast storehouse of story, imagery, and metaphor. The world of metaphor, images and stories that communicate God's identity and those immutable truths that bring our faith to life. The metaphors of Scripture captivate our imaginations and invite us to feel, experience, and think deeply about God's activity in our lives.

This morning in the words of scripture Carol read for us we meet an array of characters: a paralytic and his benevolent friends, a reviled tax collector and a group of pharisees ganging up on him, and we meet the bride and her bridegroom.

These individuals whose stories are, in many respects, like our own are woven together through Jesus' prophetic and poignant use of a metaphor. So I want to unpack this passage in 3 parts:

1. The New Wine
2. The New Vessel
3. And New Life

First, the new wine. Lying on his mat for years, and in all likelihood decades, it would be nearly impossible to keep from having one's world shrivel up and shrink down to little more than the reach his arm—pitifully extending a cup for a handout. I can imagine that long ago, as friends and loved ones went on with their lives, and he became just too inconvenient, that his experience of the world around him was limited to the little mat-sized world he inhabited. The cup from which he drank was bitter vinegar. He lost hope, but apparently he still has a few friends who did not, they carried him to Jesus.

It is easy for people to become turned in on themselves. It's all too easy to walk those well-worn paths of self-pity, addiction, and self-destructive behavior, drinking from the same bitter wells. Those who work with persons caught in cycles of addiction will attest that when a person is trapped, they will attest that their worlds feel tiny and enclosed, locked from the inside.

And it would make sense in our experience that the very best thing that could happen to this man, as his friends brought him to Jesus, would be for him to regain the use of his legs. But apparently even this is a short-sighted vision for what this man's life can be. You see what Jesus offers him is not

just a temporal fix, but a new imagination. Having strength return to his legs may only be a fraction of this man's paralysis, and addressing his physical paralysis may keep him mentally, emotionally, and spiritually confined.

You perceive your deepest need is your inability to walk, but I want to give you a new mind, new eyes, a new imagination to see my presence in your world.

Jesus came, not just to forgive sins and give people assurance of heaven when they die, but he came to pull back the shades on our enclosed lives and reveal God's expansive Kingdom alive and pulsating here in our present. We may see the needs as declining church attendance, or the need of a new job or some new friends, or a timely election or reelection, but these can be shortsighted solutions. Jesus wants to give us a cosmic, God-oriented imagination

Jesus perceiving their thoughts...

What the friends had was not a deficiency of faith, but a deficiency of imagination. They were fearful because Jesus had drawn them beyond the boundaries of what they thought was good, beyond the boundaries of what their imaginations could grasp, beyond the boundaries of their understanding of life.

One of my favorite podcasts is author Malcolm Gladwell's Broken Record. On my way back from my valentine's date with Annie Friday night I listened to an absolutely fascinating episode about David Bowie, Jazz Pianist Keith Jarrett, and an unplayable piano. In what has become the highest selling solo jazz album of all time, Keith Jarrett somewhat reluctantly performed at the Cologne Opera house on a broken-down baby grand piano. Out of tune and too small to fill the space, Jarrett is forced to dig deeply, mining creativity and inspiration from the deepest and yet untapped stores within him. Instead of being a disaster, because of the limitations of his small piano, he used the opportunity to do something never before heard in music.

David Bowie, who loved roadblocks and self imposed obstacles in his music making, said this in the episode: "If you feel safe in the area you're working in, you're not working in the right area. Always go a little further into the water than you feel you're capable of being in. Go a little bit out of your depth. And when you don't feel that your feet are quite touching the bottom, you're just about in the right place to do something exciting."

Jesus is saying to us I know you can't see it now, but the thing that will help you soar within my kingdom is realizing the fullness of your identity in my image. This paralytic and his friends were being filled with new wine. Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers has a famous quote that says: "The glory of God is man fully alive."

CS Lewis said: "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Good enough is the enemy of great. Comfort and ease in this life can keep us from stepping into the place where the Kingdom of God breaks in.

Second, the vessel.

Matthew was a tax collector, and tax collectors were officials of the Roman government who were almost universally reviled. They were contracted by the Roman authority, were often greedy and opportunistic, and all too willing to put aside community life and values, family relationships, for the chance to make lots of money off of their fellow community members.

Tax collectors would be given the requisite tax amount by Rome to collect from their fellow citizens, which they would do. However, there was an unwritten rule that allowed each of them to set their rate. Then whatever they made over and above the amount required by Rome they could keep for themselves. This meant that Tax Collectors were often very wealthy. They were barred from the synagogue, treated as on the level of beasts and things unclean. And according to Leviticus they not allowed to give testimony in court. Tax collectors were treated on the same level as robbers and murderers.

So when Jesus comes to Matthew and, in effect says, by following me you are going to be my vessel, he was redefining what it means to be a vessel. The Old Testament says a great deal about what it meant to be a vessel fit to receive God's presence and Spirit—there are long lists of instructions on how to prepare for the presence, what to do when the presence was present, and what types of people were unclean, and thus exempt from the presence. The Holiness codes of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, and some of the historical accounts of Samuel, Kings, Ezra, and Nehemiah seem to teach rigorous separation rather than compassionate identification with those who are alien.

But Jesus in encountering Matthew the Tax Collector builds his new vision, articulates his new requirement for vesselhood from one verse from Hosea 6:6:

**For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**

One commentator puts it this way: God is gracious before he is demanding.

What Jesus is revealing in his redefinition of what it means to be a vessel is, what New Testament Commentator Dale Bruner describes as the “deeper Word.” I desire mercy not sacrifice; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. This is the deeper Word.

Living a life of faith and practice as followers of Jesus, it is easy to get swept up into the excitement of new disciplines, new practices, new fervor, a new sense of your own identity. But Jesus is saying to each of us all I want is your heart, not your will power. I want your humanity, not your spirituality. I don't want spiritual superheroes; I want human beings (humane beings).

Finally, the new life. To the paralytic and his friends, Jesus gave a new wine (a new imagination of what true life meant). For the tax collector, he would be a new vessel for God's work to move and flourish. Now Jesus ties these together by the use of a metaphor about how we treat this new wine. Jesus says it doesn't make any sense to take a new unshrunk piece of cloth and sew it into an old garment, it will pull and tear and make the hole worse. Nor should you put new wine in old wineskins, for they will burst and then both are destroyed. New wine for new wineskins.

Again, Jesus is using a rich and vivid metaphor to depict how his life will flourish within us. This is an invitation to renewal, an invitation to be continually moved by the transformative context reshaping, recreating, reimagining life of Jesus Christ in us. If his message comes to reside in hearts and lives that are static and immovable, eventually that will sour the wine. But at the same time, if his new wine doesn't come in and find a home in lives that only ever search for what's new and don't receive the strength and gifts of the past, the vessel will not have the strength to hold.

What a rich metaphor for our worship life, for the mission of WPC, for what God is doing in our midst right now. For those of you who are new, and joining this journey of faith-seeking people in the last few months or the last few years, you are joining a community that has a history as rich as Wabash's own. And for those of you who were raised in faith here, and you have been a part of this for as long as you can remember. Jesus is at work, he's doing a new thing, new wine is being poured into our lives. Will we be a vessel that is read for the new season, will our commitment to God and to this place be so expansive that we are willing and ready to relinquish control to the Spirit and invite that new imagination to move among us?

We have a rich past, and an exciting future. And the promise of the Gospel is that if we are following Jesus both will be preserved, for his glory, for his joy, for his peace. Amen.