

Journeys of Love: Action and Reaction
John 2:13-22
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
March 4, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

Jesus told them a parable, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins. Both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.”

Today’s Gospel lesson leads us in a new direction. Jesus proclaims a new teaching, a new interpretation of our faith. This change of direction is important and necessary, but it leads through tension and resistance.

It’s important to remember, I believe, that today’s passage, this occasion of Jesus driving out the money changers from the temple, immediately follows the episode in his ministry of the wedding at Cana. He turns water into wine. The story is summed up like this, only two verses before this morning’s reading, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”

How is Jesus’ glory revealed, not only in the Scriptures but in our world each day?

What does this new direction mean for us?

I am just back from the NEXT Church national gathering in Baltimore. NEXT Church is a movement. It is a community of Presbyterian leaders, people like you and me, whose mission is to strengthen a vibrant and thriving church that shares the good news of Jesus in ways that matter. We heard wonderful sermons from Billy Honor and Jennifer Barchi. (Jennifer was a participant in our Pastoral Development Seminars.) We heard an excellent presentation from Jonathan Walton, who teaches at Harvard Divinity School.

There are two moments I want to share. The first seemed small and simple. Halfway through one presentation, the speaker invited us to get up and find a new seat. She wanted us to have a new perspective, a new viewpoint on what was happening up-front.

I didn’t like it. I was comfortable in my seat, comfortable where and with whom I was sitting, just the right distance from the podium, close enough to pay attention but far enough away not to be bothered if something was shared I didn’t like. I got up and moved, but I didn’t like it.

That moment reminds me of us, of the Presbyterian Church, of the church of Jesus Christ. So often in church, we know what we expect. We know what we like. And we want what we expect and what we like to happen!

Think about it. We expect one of the highlights of the year for us will be the celebration of Easter. We will gather in only four more weeks to celebrate that Jesus has left the cross, that the tomb is empty, that no grave could hold him, that he is resurrected. We know what scripture will be read. We know what songs we want to sing and hear. We know there will be special music on that great day. Heck, we even know where we want to sit.

We like the old wineskins. We don’t want to be led in a new direction. A change of direction may be important, but we meet it with tension and resistance and trouble.

That’s what happens with the Jewish leaders who speak with Jesus after he causes the ruckus in the temple. The trouble doesn’t start right after all the commotion, no. The trouble starts when Jesus begins explaining himself.

The religious people ask Jesus, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” (In other words, what’s up? What’s your interpretation? Why did you do all this?) And it is Jesus’ explanation that gets him in hot water.

Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” That unexpected answer doesn’t fit their expectations at all. The new wine begins to damage the old wineskins.

You see, the religious people talking with Jesus know what they expect. They know what scriptures will be read. They know what songs they want to sing and hear. Heck, they even know their perspective and point of view; their conviction is that the temple is the center of their faith. Their place, their “pew,” if you will, grounds their belief in God.

They are sure their practice, their routine is central and essential. They miss completely that Jesus is inviting them to something very different, to discovering God’s presence *everywhere the Spirit leads*, not just in the sanctuary.

Today’s Gospel lesson leads in a new direction. This change of direction is critically important, for Jesus’ glory is revealed each day *out in our world*.

That leads me to the second moment from the NEXT Church national gathering. Several leaders from BUILD, Baltimore United in Leadership Development - the sister organization to our SURE, Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity – testified about Turnaround Tuesday.

Turnaround Tuesday is a partnership of churches and anchor employers in Baltimore to help put residents to work. Church members work with a wide range of residents, many ex-offenders and ex-addicts, to place them in jobs.

The most transformative moment in the presentation was when they shared BUILD had gone out on the streets of the city and talked with thousands of people in the community. Baltimore was becoming increasingly violent. They asked thousands of residents one question: What would change the violence? Through all the responses, they heard one word over and over again: jobs, jobs, jobs.

So the congregations partnered with Johns Hopkins and other key corporations in the city. They started a job training and placement movement that has, to date, helped 450 people get jobs. 65% are ex-offenders.

Two of the new leaders of Turnaround Tuesday spoke to us. They testified to making peace with their past, moving past their former drug use or criminal record, rebuilding their community and their belief in themselves.

Sisters and brothers, this is a new direction for the churches of Baltimore. It invites them to look at their community from a different viewpoint, to follow the Spirit of Christ out into the community, asking, always asking, What new thing is God doing here and now? What new thing is God doing here and now?

I was deeply touched by the testimony of the two new leaders who spoke at the national gathering last week. Without perhaps realizing it, their words echoed the testimony of Jesus. Through destruction leads the journey to new life. Through the darkness we discover the light that shines forever. In the wilderness we discover the goodness and beauty of God’s great love.

I saw a social media post a few days ago that reminded me of the power of our perspective. All it takes is a phone call from a loved one or a doctor’s diagnosis, it said, and life is forever changed. Our whole framework, our viewpoint is altered. Nothing will ever be the same.

But that is not only true for tragedy. It is also true for new life. If we look with the eyes of Christ, we can see the resurrection that comes through destruction. If we look ahead with faith and fortitude, we can witness the power of new direction.

Today we celebrate communion. The meal at this table does not leave us unchanged. We do not go through the motions, receiving the body and blood of Jesus the same way we have a hundred times before. No.

Here we find the strength for new vision, the energy for new direction. Here we receive the new wine of God's promise. We are given the faith to look at our lives and world differently, to see hope where we first only saw despair, to see trust where we first only recognized brokenness.

This is where God's glory is revealed. Not here at the Table. But in the places we are driven out in the world, where we listen to the deepest yearnings of our neighbors, where we become God's salt and light, where we partner with others to make a difference in our world.

May we discover God's glory on our journeys of love.