

Title: The new and the old

Text: Mark 2:18-3:12

Date: March 18, 2012

I'm the type of person that hates throwing things away. Whether it's the practical side in me, or my Chinese-Toisan heritage, I tend to save and keep things well beyond their use. A part of it, I realize, is being cheap – I don't like spending more money than necessary. And I always have the mentality that – I might need this someday, or that lost part will suddenly appear making the item useful again. You know what I'm talking about? That plastic food container with the missing or warped lid? The old VCR machine you have lying around? And sometimes our fixes or upgrades, if done improperly, end up making the whole unit inoperable. For example, i decided to upgrade my desktop computer – and it was at a point where I needed a whole new system. So I got the most basic PC I could find. Well that lead to a new monitor and keyboard as well. But then I found out my printer and scanner would not work on this new system.... so I had to get my friend to uninstall the operating system and install an older version. You think that would be simple, but I remember that it took an entire evening and then some. And even then, my printer and scanner weren't fully functional.

When Jesus started talking about not sewing a new patch of cloth on a old garment or not pouring new wine into old wineskins, it was his way explaining what was going on; the bigger picture of what he was doing. He's been healing people, casting out demons, forgiving sins, eating with tax-collectors and sinners... all which have been making the religious leaders, the Pharisees quite upset. The tension is building.

Now, Jesus was questioned by people about his disciples – why were they not fasting like John's disciples or the Pharisees? Well, one doesn't fast when there is a celebration is going on. Fasting, particularly in the OT scriptures, was an act of repentance or mourning. Jesus likens himself as the groom of a wedding banquet, and his disciples were the guests. It would not be appropriate for the wedding guests to fast while the groom was still celebrating with them.

Likewise, it wasn't appropriate to apply new things to an old system. Jesus was starting something new – and the old way of doing things were no longer sufficient. To continue with the old ways with the new would be damaging. Much like if you're trying to get healthy, you can't simply cut out fat and continue to eat lots of sweets. Something different had to be done.

But have you ever thought to ask: what was wrong with the old way? What was wrong with the old covenant such that God had to send His Son to become human flesh? Why was the New Testament necessary?

We have to go back, first of all, to God's intent for humanity. If we make changes to something old, or go for something new – often there is a reason for it. I'm not talking about this consumeristic need that's been ingrained in us to pursue the latest and greatest thing. But even that is a sign of something that is not quite right. We are driven by needs and desires. So what does God desire? And has that changed over time?

There are many different opinions out there about what God wants for us and from us. For a long time, the evangelical narrative has been “the salvation of souls.” Hence: the huge push for evangelism, missions, and absorption of pop culture into mainstream evangelicalism. This has lead to a whole host of problems including shallow faith, poor discipleship, and an consumeristic attitude when it comes to the church. Surely, I believe God is for the salvation of people – but what do we mean by salvation?

What's been missing, according to some theologians, is the idea of Shalom, God's peace for the world. And I know I've talked about this before. Salvation isn't just about what happens after you die, but it's about God's ongoing reconciliation in creation – in the here and now. The story about Adam and Eve isn't necessarily about humanity's origin, but humanity's purpose. God created us for relationship – with Him, with each other, and with the rest of God's good earth. And His intention after the Fall, was to always walk again with us and to restore all broken relationships.

His means of working was to start with the particular in order to reach the universal. He chose Abraham and Sarah to bring forth a new people so that they may a blessing to the land and to other peoples.

“I will make you into a great nation,
 and I will bless you;
 I will make your name great,
 and you will be a blessing.
 I will bless those who bless you,
 and whoever curses you I will curse;
 and all peoples on earth
 will be blessed through you.” (Gen 12:1-3)

The understanding was that if Israel obeyed the Law, they would enjoy the blessings of God. If Israel disobeyed, then they would be cursed. But they always had the choice to obey or disobey. And even though Israel disobeyed, which they did time and time again, it was God's faithfulness that kept the covenant. It was God's faithfulness that kept the marriage alive, even though His spouse was adulterous and worshiped other gods. Despite all this, He still wanted to be with His people. He wanted, and still wants shalom or in other words, wholeness.

So what was the problem? Even though God made his dwelling with His people, access to the presence of God was limited to the high priest and only briefly once a year – the Day of Atonement; the day when an animal is sacrificed for sins of the people. This took place at The Temple with the Holy of Holies, where God's presence resided. There are many theories of atonement – which I won't get into. The term “atonement” refers to how the problem of sin is solved. Basically we know that God wants shalom with us, but we sin and that sin separates us from God and from each other... which leads to death.

The old system, which was the current system during Jesus' life, was limited. And I believe that the religious leaders maintained what they could out of fear: their identity as a people was being threatened by the Romans. They also maintained the system out of comfort and elitism, they had power to decide who was “in” and who was “out.” Instead of extending the blessing, the shalom and grace of God, to the marginalized in society, they heaped guilt on them instead (Luke 11). They kept their seats of honour in the synagogues and failed to pursue justice.

We see their attitude especially in the healing of the man with the shrivelled hand. They were offended that Jesus would heal this man on the Sabbath, even though it meant giving life back to this man. For the Jewish people, the observance of the Sabbath set them apart from other groups. It was one day of the week where they ceased from work and enter into rest. Oral tradition dictated that unless it's a life-or-death matter, medical work should be done on all other days of the week. But was the issue about breaking the Sabbath?

Jesus made the astonishing claim that like King David who was “above the law” so to speak, he also was not subject to the Sabbath Law, but Lord over it.¹ This was beyond what they could tolerate. They were afraid that Jesus was undermining their authority and their interpretation of the Law.² In the name of religious piety, they have become insensitive to the purposes of God and the suffering of people. What was Jesus' reaction? Anger and deep grief over their hardness of heart. Clearly they were not understanding. Instead of seeing the blessing of God, they saw a threat to their way of life. Instead of praising God and giving thanks for the good done, they conspired to have Jesus killed.

How have we become insensitive to the purposes of God and the suffering of people? Have we become so caught up in this commercial empire and individualistic lifestyle, that we've forgotten to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8)? Do we see the needs among our brothers and sisters here and respond? Or are we always caught up with our own worries?

[Share with one another how someone met a need of yours recently, or how you responded to another person's needs]

Jesus' ministry was the start of something new, that it was inaugurating or heralding, proclaiming the Kingdom of God; over and against the kingdom(s) of the earth. Not only does Jesus talk about it, but he demonstrated or physically manifested the Kingdom, through the healing of the sick, casting out demons, and the calling of unlikely disciples. he did this purposefully by going

¹ Rosner et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*.

against traditional rules and regulations. It's not that the Law didn't work, but it didn't go far enough. It wasn't enough for God to reside in the Holy of Holies. God wanted to reside in every person's heart. And in order for God to do that something different had to be done. That's why Jesus had to come. He is the fulfilment of the Law, by living a sinless life then giving up that life for us. And when that was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was then able to dwell in us.

All this say – God's intention for shalom, peace with his people and peace among his people has never changed. God's intent was to always be with His people, and we see this culminate in the book of Revelation, chapter 21:1-4.

*Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! **God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.** ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

This is the “end goal” - where all of history and the present age is moving towards.

The difficulty of the Mark passage for me was understanding what was so new about Jesus. If God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament, then why Jesus? Why the new covenant?

If God's intention was to be with His people, then it starts to make sense.... that even with all our brokenness, the ways we hurt each other, the destruction we cause the earth – His intent is always and will be shalom. The way that is carried out is different -> this time through God's very self.

So then, how are we extending God's shalom in this world?

How are we extending God's shalom to others and to creation?

I don't want to guilt trip you into solving all the world's problem. But I believe that each of us have a part to play in the Kingdom of God. If God is extending shalom to us, and he is, then we

ought to be extending his blessing to others... and we do it within the sphere of influence that God has given us and with the gifting and talents he's shaped us with. The Church, is not meant to be a safe haven, where we get to hang out and enjoy ourselves until we die. God is using us to extend His blessing.

Another question remains though. Is God doing something new in your life – now? Do you think God is wanting to do something different in you? His intentions are the same, but perhaps the way, the method, the process may seem unusual or unfamiliar. Is there something that you've been holding on to that is keeping you from living out God's purposes? Is the Spirit prompting you for certain changes? And do you have the people in your life to help discern with you how that may look like?