

This little parable about new wine in old wine skins is pretty familiar. Matthew, Mark and Luke all have it. A traditional interpretation is that the teaching of Jesus is the new wine that will explode the rigid confines of Jewish law – it won't be important anymore.

A couple problems with that – one is that Jesus never undid Jewish law. He was in fact a very faithful Jew. Another problem is a line that is unique to Luke's telling of the story – verse 39. No one who tastes new wine and old wine prefers the new – they say the old is better. If any of you are wine drinkers and know a little bit about it, you know well-aged wine is the best.

Jesus is a faithful Jew who observes the Sabbath and the festivals. He presumably eats Kosher. The Jewish tradition is important to him. He doesn't throw out the old.

But when you make new wine, you have to adapt to it – you have to have a new wineskin or as it finishes fermenting, it will explode.

The old is not bad – in fact it sometimes it may be better. But when something new is happening, adaptations will need to be made.

That plays out in this collection of stories.

First, Jesus calls Levi to be a disciple. That is troublesome to everyone, not so much because of the law but because tax collectors were generally considered traitors to their Jewish family and neighbors.

And, not unlike today, someone who wants to have influence has to be careful about who he or she associates with. Sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners was a risky move for someone who was considered a teacher. Shunning tax collectors had become the way things were done.

Next is the part about fasting. The disciples of the typical Jewish teacher had times of prayer and fasting in addition to the public fasts. But Jesus and his disciples seemed to always be eating and drinking...sometimes with the wrong sort of people.

With those two things Jesus might not be breaking any laws. But he's certainly not doing things in the expected way. He's breaking with tradition.

Then, the Sabbath day scenes drop. Now he's really stretching those wineskins. First, he and his disciples pull off a little grain as they walk through a field and eat it. That goes over the line of acceptable Sabbath work, according to the scribes and rabbis.

The law of Moses doesn't give very specific rules about what is and isn't allowed on the Sabbath, so Israel's teachers fleshed out a dizzying array of rules. Picking grain is out of bounds.

Then Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath. Now he's gone completely off the rails in the eyes of his critics.

He is exploding a wineskin. But there is nowhere in the gospels that indicate Jesus did away with the law to observe Sabbath rest.

So the Jewish law itself is not the old wineskin. The problem with an old wineskin is not that it's bad. It's just not flexible enough to accommodate the gas produced by fermenting wine. So you have to adapt – and get a new wineskin. Because the whole purpose is to preserve the wine.

Purpose is really what's at the heart of all of this. The law and the traditions are not bad. In fact Sabbath rest was a crucial part of life, to allow everyone to rest. It is unfortunate that Christians have by and large abandoned it.

What Jesus is getting at with these scenes is to focus on what's important about laws and traditions. You don't observe them just for their own sake. You observe them for their underlying purpose.

Laws and traditions propped up by a rigid container can in fact come into opposition with their intended purpose. What's beneath them really is the non-negotiables of the life of faith.

Sabbath was instituted by God because rest is important. It's good for people. It's a way to not only love yourself but love your neighbor as well. So when a neighbor's well-being or life is at stake, healing on the Sabbath makes perfect sense. It's not a contradiction at all.

Fasting can be a way to focus our prayer life – to set aside our own agendas and be attentive to God. But the disciples don't need to fast to focus on their relationship with Jesus. He's right there with them! Of course they're going to eat, drink, and be merry together!

And sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners is for the purpose of drawing them into something life-giving. That's what's important to Jesus, not his reputation.

New wine will need new wineskins. But it's an adaptation, not a replacement for well-aged wine. Some stretching and discomfort will occur. But the end purpose is good wine.

Sometimes rigid observance of the law got in the way of its purpose. And its purpose was for the flourishing and well-being of all people. That's the non-negotiable.

In the church today, we too are facing a struggle between new and old. The oldest pattern for churches in this country was the local church that served a fairly small area. Numerous churches cropped up, sometimes no more than a few miles away from each other. And in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they grew.

Many church members across our nation remember the days when they had to build new wings to accommodate exploding children's programs. The number of services increased and the size of buildings increased to accommodate the growth. Church participation was just part and parcel of being a member of a community. People often didn't think much about it. Joining a church is just what you did.

Then it started going downhill. A little uptick in the latter part of the century didn't last. And now we are where we are, with churches all over the country closing. Or finding new ways to be church together.

That's where we find ourselves I think. In some places, struggling churches merge with a big mega-church and essentially become a satellite of the mega church.

But that is neither an option or even the best thing for many small congregations.

Small congregations have learned how to adapt to circumstances for their entire existence. They have been making new wineskins over and over for years.

As we look into our future, we seem to be in the wineskin making business again. In some ways, whatever comes that is new might actually be a return to the very old – church as it was in the first 300 years after Jesus' resurrection.

Church as it was before it became synonymous with the Roman Empire. Because Empire was never what the church was supposed to be. Not just because of size, but because in that unholy merger, the non-negotiables of Jesus' saving mission lost out to the tradition and rules of Empire.

As we look ahead to whatever configuration lies in store for us, we need to be very clear about the non-negotiables. Some of them are right here in these stories.

One non-negotiable will still be inviting others into this Kingdom of God thing Jesus was about. Only it can't just be people who are just like us. In fact it can't even be only people who we think are the proper sort. And it can't be done with threats and laws and rules.

If it is going to happen, it will be under God's power, but it will be through us sharing time and space with people that we might not be used to hanging out with.

Another non-negotiable is that our spiritual practices – prayer, meditation, fasting, worship – are for the purpose of focusing on God and fueling us for the mission. But there needs to be room for joy.

And it will also mean remembering that God's law has always been for the purpose of healing, wholeness, and well-being for God's people.

When our traditions and our way of doing things...and even our theology...get in the way of loving people and inviting people into this thing God is doing, we have missed the boat. When our traditions and our way of doing things empower and guide us into being a community that heads out into the world to love and invite into God's love, then we're on the right track.

Some of the old will still be good. Some of it won't. Some of the new will need a new wineskin. And sometimes we'll get it wrong and the wineskin will explode.

And through it all, we'll trust that God's purpose for us remains the same as it has always been – to share the love of God with the world around us.