

A new you for a new decade

Sermon for Sunday, January 3, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 5:36-39

If my memory serves correctly, W.O. Mitchell's book *Who Has Seen the Wind?* has an episode where the church caretaker is also the local moonshine maker. To evade the police, he has set up his still in the crawl space under the church building. The jugs have been filled with brew and left alone to ferment. During that process, carbon dioxide is produced, and if there is vent to release the gas, the pressure builds up. During one Sunday worship service — you know where this is going, don't you! — the jugs blow their tops off, spraying moonshine all over the place. You can imagine the effect this had on the worshippers upstairs.

Maybe W.O. got his idea from this story by Jesus.

Luke 5:36-39, Today's English Version:

Jesus also told them this parable: "You don't tear a piece off a new coat to patch up an old coat. If you do, you will have torn the new coat, and the piece of new cloth will not match the old. Nor do you pour new wine into used wineskins, because the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will pour out, and the skins will be ruined. Instead, new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins!"

If you put new wine into old wineskins, where the leather is hard and unyielding, you're going to have trouble as the wine starts to ferment. This may be a piece of new knowledge for us, but for the people back then, they would have a good laugh as they pictured in their minds someone's wineskin bursting and spraying wine all over the room.

Just as ridiculous is the picture of someone taking a brand new coat, cutting a piece of fabric out of it, to patch a hole in an old threadbare coat.

The message in both these stories is the same: old containers won't suffice to hold the new material, and the old methods and traditions won't be able to contain the dynamic and life-transforming Jesus. In Revelation 21, God says, "I am making all things new." Jesus invites us to step out of the ruts we've worn and to follow a new way.

Many who heard and followed Jesus found their lives transformed. Others found his presence too radical and threatening. He stirred up controversy in the religious community when his followers no longer observed the

cherished tradition of fasting. Their unconventional behaviour challenged the daily ritual which had been an expression of faithfulness for generations. The Messiah is here, and business as usual, even spiritual business, needs to be questioned and rethought.

The disruption of revered patterns spawns anxiety in every age. A newspaper was interviewing a man who had been in his Anglican church for many years, and was celebrating 50 years as the Warden (sort of the person in charge of things). The interviewer said, "I suppose you've seen a lot of changes over the years." The Warden replied, "Yes, and I've been against every single one of them."

This anxiety over new things can drive us to shut out anything different, and to give the place of highest honour to the status quo. This is where we get the saying of the sacred seven words: "We've never done it that way before."

When we feel anxious about the new wine Jesus is giving us, instead of fighting it, that energy can fuel creativity and excitement. It can open doors to new ways of serving others that we may never have considered possible. It can lead us to fresh and vibrant ways to be witnesses of God's love.

This quest to follow where God is leading us today has happened again and again through the life of the church. Acts 15 tells of one such controversy. Could the Church be reshaped as a "new wineskin" inclusive enough to welcome the gentiles? Do non-Jews who become Christians need to be circumcised and obey the Jewish dietary laws? The answer arrived at by those first century church leaders surprised many and again reminded us that God is always doing "new things." It happened again at the Protestant Reformation, and has happened again and again and again in the Church.

In a few weeks, we will be having our annual meetings. Between now and then, I ask us all to pray and ask for God's Spirit to breathe new life into us, both individually and as a church. When you pray, have a paper and pen with you, so you will be ready to write down the ideas which God is giving you. Bring those ideas with you to our meeting. Start talking about them even before, though. Share with others what God is doing in your life, and let the excitement spread.

As we start a new decade, let me ask you: What are your old wineskins? What are your old ways of thinking? What are your old habits? Are they outdated ways of behaving? They may have worked well in the past, but are they still useful or helpful today?

NOTE: I am *not* saying that just because a practice or a tradition is old, it must be bad! The reason some things have stayed the same for a long time is that they have been tried and tested over the years and found to be worthy. *But* on the other hand, there are also many practices and traditions which have stayed the same only because we are too lazy to change, or too timid, or too complacent, or too comfortable.

Three new “wines” and “wineskins” for 2010

I read an article recently by Rick Warren in which he says we will face at least three new “wines” in the coming year: new problems, new pressures, and new possibilities. To handle these new challenges, we’re going to need the new “wineskins” of creativity, conviction, and courage. Let’s look at each of these.

1) New problems will require creativity

Here’s a promise for you: you’re going to have more problems this year. The good news is many of them won’t be the same problems that troubled you last year. You get a whole new set!

These new problems will require new solutions, which require creativity. Your old ways of thinking and relating, your old attitudes may not work anymore. That’s why the Bible says,

Proverbs 18:15, New Living Translation:
Intelligent people are always open to new ideas. In fact, they look for them.

Most people spend more time and energy trying to get around problems than they do solving them. Instead of avoiding or ignoring your problems in 2010, ask God to give you the creativity to solve them.

To stay creative you must intentionally avoid a “hardening of the attitudes.” You’ve got to keep growing and developing.

2) New pressures will require conviction

Conviction is the willingness to stand up for what you believe, coupled with the determination to do something about it—to basically live or die by that belief.

Romans 12:2, J.B. Phillips Translation:
Don’t let the world squeeze you in its mold, but let God remake you so your whole attitude of mind is changed.

Your convictions are extremely important. Back in the 80’s a rather strangely dressed singer named Boy George rose to the height of popularity singing the line “I’m a man without conviction” in his song “Karma

Chameleon” But today, you don’t hear much about him. Why? Because you don’t last in life without conviction. A chameleon is a type of lizard that changes its colours to match whatever background it’s in or on.

Telemachus was a monk who lived back when gladiators fought to death in the coliseum. People were fascinated by the blood and gore but Telemachus was very disturbed that the Emperor who was a Christian, sponsored the games and that so many people who called themselves Christian attended. What, he wondered, could be further from the Spirit of Christ than the horrible cruelty of the gladiatorial games?

The bishops and priests of his day spoke out against them, but most people were deaf to their message. Telemachus realized that talking about this evil was not enough. It was time to do something. But what could he actually accomplish – one lone monk against the entire Roman Empire? But he decided he had to obey the voice of Christ within him— regardless of the consequences and so he set out for Rome. Soon he was seated among all the other people as the gladiators came out into the center of the arena. But just as they drew their swords Telemachus jumped down into the arena and stood between them held up a cross and cried out, “In the name of Christ, stop fighting!” The two men hesitated. Nothing like this had ever happened before. They didn’t know what to do. They put up their swords for a moment. But the spectators were furious. Telemachus had robbed them of their entertainment. They yelled wildly and rushed him and beat him to death with sticks and stones. But then an odd thing happened. The mob and the spectators who had remained in their seats grew quiet. A feeling of revulsion at what had been done swept over them as they viewed his broken, bleeding body laying on the coliseum floor. The emperor rose and left the Coliseum and the people silently followed him out. A few days later he issued an edict forbidding all future gladiatorial games. That was the last gladiator fight ever held — all because one individual stood by his convictions and dared to say “No!”

3) New possibilities that will require courage

Each New Year brings new possibilities and great opportunities. But it won’t happen automatically. You’ve got to step out in faith. There’s always an element of risk in faith.

Hosea 10:12, Today’s English Version:
“Plow new ground for yourselves, plant righteousness, and reap the blessings that your devotion to me will produce. It is time for you to turn

to me, your Lord, and I will come and pour out blessings upon you.”

What are you planning to harvest this year? A year from now how will you be different? If you want to be different in twelve months, you've got to start cultivating some new habits, activities, and relationships now! Success doesn't just happen. It takes effort.

What do you want to be different in your family.... your finances...or your walk with Christ? Whatever you sow you'll reap. If you don't sow anything, you won't reap anything. I dare you to do something different with your life this year! I double dare you!

There's a scene in the book *Alice in Wonderland* in which Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me please, which way I ought to walk from here?" To which the cat replies, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

Let me ask you this morning. Do you know "where you want to get to" with your life in 2010? Or will you just wander down any old path you find?

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The new wine and the new life with which Jesus refreshes you — how will you live that out?