

Sermon – February 4, 2024
“New or Old Wine?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 6:5-8 & Luke 5:33-39

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and renew our desire to be laborers in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Are we ready for the season of Lent? Are we ready for a season when we reflect deeply on the state of our souls and seek to abide more completely in Jesus? Are we ready to deny ourselves and to seek to carry hunger so that we might experience Jesus' light burden and easy yoke as our hearts are turned to him? Today let's begin by turning to the passages from Luke's Gospel and Jesus' teaching on fasting, and then we will turn to Matthew and look at making space in our lives for fasting and prayer.

In the first part of the scripture from Luke, I think we can hear in the question asked of Jesus about fasting a note of a complaint from the Pharisees and scribes. They ask, "Why don't your disciples fast like the disciples of the Pharisees or even the disciples of John the Baptist's?" Their question seems to be in response to a large celebration at Levi's house after Levi is called to follow Jesus and throws a party with his tax collector friends where Jesus is present and there

is eating and drinking. The question they ask brings to light two groups in the New Testament who fast and whom we need to be aware of as we prepare to undertake our own fast. The Pharisees fast from a legalistic approach. The Law says fast and so they fast, seeking to meet every aspect of the Law's requirements and to be righteous through the Law, while missing the reason for fasting, opening one's self to a closer connection to God. When we fast, we need to avoid the legalistic approach of the Pharisees and not get caught up in what we can and cannot do. We need to avoid the legalistic issues like what is the right time to start and stop fasting, what we can drink, what counts as food and what doesn't, and instead seek to focus on letting our fast be a means of grace through which we experience God's steadfast love. We also don't want to get caught up in a legalistic approach to fasting and be those who want others to know we are fasting so that we might be seen as righteous. We want to fast with a heart turned to God, seeking to abide more fully in Jesus. The other group of fasters mentioned here are John the Baptist's disciples. We don't know much about them as they are not described in our Bibles. We do know John is in the wilderness, dressed in basic clothing and eating wilderness foods while seeking to bring about his understanding of the coming kingdom of God. John's disciples represent those who fast for a purpose. Their purpose for fasting may be to help usher in a removal of Roman rule in Israel and a return to self-rule through the arrival of God's Messiah. They may be fasting to bring about God's work to accomplish this end. I am not condemning fasting for God's kingdom but want to caution us that fasting is not a means by which we control God. If we approach fasting as a way to get God to do what we desire, then we have moved from a fast that seeks to connect us in a deeper way with God to a fast that seeks to control God. That is not to say that controlling God is what John's disciples are seeking to accomplish with their fasting, but it is a pitfall that we need to avoid. We do not fast to get God to do something we desire. We fast so that we might receive a blessing from God and we might be drawn closer to Him. Our fasting should be more like the examples from the early church we see in Acts: fasting so that we might be more open to God's direction in our lives, such as the decision to send Paul and Barnabas out on a mission trip that comes from their time of fasting. We fast to experience the food Jesus receives from his Father that we know nothing about. We fast to do the will of the one who sent us and to complete his work.

Jesus's answers the question about why his disciples do not fast, telling them it is because he is with them, and then immediately Jesus tells two short parables, one about old and new cloth

and one about old and new wine and wine skins. Let me point out that the context for the parables is fasting and not teaching about church renewal. Jesus assures those questioning him there will come a time when his disciples will fast. Let's look at these parables in the context of fasting.

The first is the parable about old and new cloth. They are not compatible. The new cloth, if used to repair a tear in the old, will cause the old to be torn and ruined. The old cannot change as the new can and so we are not to look to the old ways of fasting but are to seek to fast in the manner Jesus fasts. We are to seek to have our fasting lead us into a deeper abiding in Jesus and to be those who are about his will and completing his work.

The second parable is about old wine and old wineskins and new wine and new wineskins. Again, Jesus teaches through the parable that the old and new are not compatible. The old wineskins are hardened and cannot hold the new wine as it continues to ferment. If we put the new wine into the old skin, the old skin will burst, and the wine will be poured out and lost. New wine is to be put into fresh wine skins. From a fasting standpoint, how are we to hear Jesus' teaching? I think Jesus is teaching that the new way of fasting his disciples will use when they fast is not compatible with the old forms of fasting that the Pharisees or even John's disciples are using. The Pharisees were seeking righteousness from a legal view and John's disciples were perhaps fasting to bring about God's kingdom as they understood the coming messianic kingdom to be. Jesus is advocating for a different concept of fasting, a fast that leads to food they know nothing of, to do the will of the one who sends them and to complete his work. Yet, he tells those listening that they see the old wine as better and will seek it instead of the new. Jesus is telling us that the old ways of fasting are what people understand and will seek, but that he brings something new. For the Pharisees and for John's disciples, the temple was the focus of their fasting. The Pharisees fasted to show they were righteous through the keeping of the Law, and John's disciples fasted to bring about God's kingdom as they understood it to be centered in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus speaks to new wine, the Holy Spirit, he will send that will fill new temples, our bodies. If we will seek the new wine, if we will learn to fast in a new way, if our righteousness and doing God's will come from the guidance of Holy Spirit and not from the Law and temple worship, we will fast in a new way. As we fast, we are not seeking righteousness through keeping of the Law or bringing about the kingdom of God as an independent, messianic-led nation, but opening ourselves to the new food Jesus receives from the Father, doing the will of the one who sent him and completing his work. Yet, Jesus tells us

people prefer old wine. People do not seek Holy Spirit to come, fill their bodies, and give them the food Jesus has from the Father. They prefer the old wine, calling it better. When we fast, we need to be seeking the new wine of Holy Spirit filling the emptiness that the lack of food creates within us.

Let's recall for a moment the example of the early church in Acts as they pray and fast and Holy Spirit identifies Paul and Barnabus to be sent out to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. We also want to connect our praying and fasting, as the early church did. Our times of fasting, however we approach fasting, should be connected to times of prayer. We have to make space for these two spiritual disciplines. Jesus, in Matthew 6:5-6, tells us we are not to pray to be seen but to pray in our room or closet, shutting the door and praying in secret. We are to make a space to pray as we approach fasting, a space where we can carry hunger as a light burden and an easy yoke. Let me encourage us to make a space in our homes for prayer. Set aside a corner of a room and a time when we plan to be present in that space for prayer. Identify a chair we will sit in or, like John Wesley, a prayer bench where he knelt in prayer before God and daily prayed. The key is to find a time and place that works for us. If we are morning people, then let us start our day in prayer. If we are evening people, then let us pray in the evening. If we need more flexibility, then we may pray when our schedule allows. But let us make our prayer room a place where we can and do meet with Jesus daily. Let us use a journal to keep track of our prayers, our requests, and answered prayers. Let us pray for people Holy Spirit brings to our minds for us to share the Gospel with. Let us bring our Bibles into this space and listen as we read scripture for God's reply to our prayers. Make it a regular practice, be purposeful. Bring things into the prayer room that help connect us to God. Make our prayer room a place where we are moved to pray, where we pray for each other, our families, our church members, and our neighbors. Use the Lord's Prayer as both a template for prayer and as a prayer. And finally listen for Jesus' response and the guidance of Holy Spirit as we read scripture, and just sit with Jesus in our prayer space and listen for his guidance. Be sensitive to what comes to our minds as we listen and write those things down so that we will not lose them and can act on what Holy Spirit gives us.

Also, make space in our lives for fasting with our prayer time. Let Holy Spirit lead us to ways we can set aside food so that we might be carrying hunger before God not as a burden we can barely lift and rarely succeed to carry, but as a light burden and an easy yoke. Set aside some food for a time, a day, an evening, or what works for us. Let our bodies become hungry and then

let us eat, not enough to completely satisfy our hunger, but enough that we can continue to carry hunger for the time we have planned. We do need to give up food if we can, as food can become too large of a focus in our lives and giving it up breaks that focus and allows us to better focus on Jesus. As we fast, let us go to our prayer room, our prayer space, and pray. Let the two disciplines be connected. Don't get focused on praying and fasting to bring about our desires. Ask Holy Spirit to lead us into a fast that is carrying hunger so that we might learn about the food we know nothing of, that we might do the will of the one who sent us and complete his works. Do expect fasting to be a struggle. Our bodies have a need for daily bread, but try to set aside that need to the level we can for the time we have identified. Eat enough so we can continue to be hungry at some level while fasting and praying. Don't let eating too much impact our attempt to fast so that eating becomes a stumbling block. If we overeat, simply start again, and add more food to our fast until we find the level of eating where we can carry hunger. When we become hungry in our fast, try first drinking water and then add food until we can continue with hunger. Let our hunger shift our focus to Jesus and as we focus on him, let us lift up prayers to him. We are seeking to be those who are fasting and, through fasting and prayer, to be those who are attuned to what Jesus is doing around us and what he is inviting us to join him in doing to complete his work. Our goal is not so much not to eat as it is to seek to feast on the food Jesus received when he was fasting. Let Jesus, through Holy Spirit, guide us into a season of prayer and fasting. May we all find blessings as we seek to fast and pray in the season of Lent.

We are called today to come to the Lord's table and to feast with him. Let us open our hearts to receive the gifts of bread and wine at Jesus' table and to abide in him as we feast with him this morning. Let his gift of his broken body and blood bring us into a renewed connection with Jesus in heaven and him with us on earth. Come to the Lord's table and let Jesus fill your hunger for him.

Pray with me: Jesus, we come before you as those who are seeking to do the will of the one who sent us and to complete his work. Guide us to places and times of prayer and fasting. Teach us to carry hunger as a light burden and an easy yoke. Change us that we thirst for new wine that comes from you into our hearts and transforms us into your image. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Go forth as those who no longer have the bridegroom with them
and now pray and fast to receive the food we know nothing about.

Go forth to do the will of the one who sends us and to complete his work.

Amen