

Rips and Spills

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 2, 2015
Text: Matthew 9:16-17

This morning's parable from the Gospel of Matthew is short, to say the least. Two verses to be precise. The same is the case in both Mark and Luke, the other two Gospels where this parable also appears. The fact that it's included in all three Synoptic Gospels – the Gospels which summarize Jesus' life – means it must be one of the parables that everybody thought was worth remembering. It's quite an extraordinary parable precisely because it is so very simple. Or is it?

Jesus uses this parable at the end of a very long day which started in typical Jesus fashion – he calmed a storm which had blown up on the lake as he and the disciples were attempting to cross it during the night. Miracle #1. Then, Jesus is walking along and is confronted by a demoniac living in a cemetery at the edge of town. Jesus heals him by casting the demons into a herd of swine who promptly run over a cliff. Miracle #2. The townspeople weren't happy about the lost pigs so they asked Jesus to leave. He and the disciples get back into the boat and go back across the lake. He arrives at his own home town. Shortly after arriving he encounters four men carrying a friend on a mat, looking for Jesus so he can heal the man. Jesus does. Miracle #3.

Jesus continues walking along and encounters Matthew, the tax collector to whom he says, “follow me,” and Matthew does.

Miracle #4, at least in my book. Then he goes to Matthew’s house for dinner where’s he joined by an assortment of tax collectors and sinners, outraging the Pharisees who think he should only associate with the “right” people. Jesus basically says, “why should I do that? I go where I’m needed.”

After dinner some of John the Baptists disciples show up to ask Jesus a question about fasting. It seems John has them fast often and the Pharisees did he same. But not Jesus’ disciples. Why was this, they wanted to know. Today’s parable is part of the answer Jesus gave to that question. He essentially says, you can’t patch an old cloak with new fabric that hasn’t been pre-shrunk or the old cloak will rip when the new cloth shrinks. Then he says you also can’t put new wine into old wineskins or the skins will burst, spilling the wine and ruining the skins.

Wait a minute, you’re thinking. Didn’t they ask Jesus about fasting – why some people trying to be holy do fast but his disciples don’t? That was the question, right? So what’s up with ripped cloaks and spilled wine? Was Jesus talking riddles? In a word, yes.

The first thing to remember is that both of these examples Jesus was using sound odd to us but they would have instantly made sense to the people he was talking to. Most people only had

a few clothes, and usually only one cloak. It needed to last as long as possible so when it tore or developed a hole, it was mended. Because you never knew when you'd be able to have another cloak, it needed to last as long as possible so patching the right way was vital. The patch needed to be made of material that was the same age and type of cloth as the cloak itself. Otherwise when the cloak got wet – like if you got caught in the rain – the patch would pucker, ripping away from the rest of the cloak undoubtedly causing even more damage, perhaps even ruining it completely leaving you without a cloak.

Similarly, wine wasn't stored in glass bottles. Those didn't exist. Instead, wine was stored in something much more readily available, pouches fashioned from animal skins with a cap on one end. These pouches had to be cured very carefully so that the skins would remain supple. Part of this was making sure they never quite emptied because if that happened, they would dry out and become useless, thrown into the old wineskins pile. If you needed a wineskin to pour some wine into and you grabbed an old wineskin by mistake, it would burst because all the flexibility which made the wineskin strong would be gone.

Okay, but again, how does this answer the question about fasting? Well, Jesus was essentially saying that old solutions don't apply in new situations. Fasting was an important part of the proscribed ritual life of the Judaic religion that John's disciples

and the Pharisees practiced. It was considered a way of increasing one's own holiness by focusing on God instead of food. But, in Jesus' time it had become more a way of showing off one's holiness rather than something to do to get closer to God. So, Jesus is saying that fasting that's a meaningless ritual done for its own sake is nonsensical – like patching your only cloak with the wrong cloth or filling your old dried up wineskin with fresh, new wine. Both of those look like solutions to a problem, but they're not. Their quick fixes done in the wrong way for the wrong reason so they are doomed to failure. What is needed, Jesus is saying, is new ways of connecting with God that are real solutions instead of quick fixes that won't last.

Quick fixes that won't last. Isn't that the way of the world these days? Disposable bottles and plastic containers of all sorts are polluting our planet, literally choking the life out of it. Initially touted for their grab on the way, go-anywhere convenience, plastic bottles are proving Jesus' point about quick fixes that don't last but cause problems. And there are thousands of other examples like this. We live in an impatient world filled with people expecting simple answers to complex, multi-layered problems that can happen quickly and with little or no cost. Nowhere is this more evident than in the persistent problems of homelessness and hunger, so prevalent everywhere, even here in our own community.

These look like simple issues – people needing a place to live and food to eat – and it would seem simple solutions could be found. In fact, well-meaning people of all sorts, politicians, community group leaders, church leaders, keep trying to do just that. And yet still homelessness and hunger persists. You'd think we'd know by now that there are no easy answers here and finding real solutions that are not quick fixes will take time, effort and money. But whose time? Whose effort? Whose money? These are real questions that our Mission Trip team will be encountering head on during our brief sojourn amidst the issues of hunger and homelessness in Rhode Island this coming week. I know we will be changed by the experience as was the group who participated last year. I know we will be humbled by the people we meet and the stories we hear and experience. I know we will want to find quick answers to these heartbreaking issues and I know we won't be able to. And that will be hard. But finding answers isn't why we're going. Understanding the problems more deeply and reflecting how we as a church can respond as Jesus needs us to is.

Jesus needs us to be the people who aren't afraid of rips and spills as we encounter the needs of the world. Jesus needs us to figure out how to patch the cloak of homelessness the right way, so the patch lasts and the cloak doesn't rip anymore. Jesus needs us to be the people who have plenty of new wineskins for all that new wine so we don't spill a drop! Afterall, the people coming to

be refreshed at Jesus' Table need that new wine, that cup of blessing we have to share, to be restored to health and wholeness. Jesus needs us to confront the change we know needs to happen to address all those rips and spills with confidence and hope, trusting that God will always show us the way forward. Of course, it goes without saying that occasionally we'll use the wrong patch and something will rip. Occasionally we'll use the wrong wineskin and something will spill. In other words, it means that as we move forward into this ever changing, always volatile world God has placed us in, needs us to respond to as God's people, we will make mistakes from time to time as we figure out what it is God needs us to do and how we're supposed to do it. That is simply inevitable. It's okay because God will be with us. God will forgive us. God will show us what to do instead.

Rips and spills are inevitable as we live life each day. We know this! No matter how hard we try, we sometimes pick up the wrong patch. No matter how hard we try, we sometimes pick up the wrong wineskin. It's true for us as individuals. It's true for us as a church. It's true for our society and our world. We are imperfect people living in an imperfect world constantly faced with the dilemma of figuring out what is a quick fix that won't work and a real solution that will. That's just life. And life is precisely what we will be encountering on the Mission Trip, rips and spills abounding I'm sure. I know they'll be part of our

experiences on the Mission Trip this week because stuff always goes wrong. In fact, that's a key part of the whole experience. The unexpected glitches, the plans that go off the rails, and the incredible things you encounter precisely because stuff doesn't go according to plan – those are the God moments of Mission Trips. I know we'll have them this week. We'll have plenty of stories to tell about them and I hope you'll be ready to hear them. That's why we're going after all. I'm also sure you'll encounter your own rips and spills in the week ahead. Amen.