

Sermon Text for January 21, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 9:1-2 and Matthew 9:14-17

“Go do something new”

The life of the church is a curious life. So much of what we do is undergirded by Scripture. Our programs, our way of doing things. Today we have ordained and installed church officers to lead the church and to be the ones chosen by you, the congregation to not do the work, but to provide the first line of battle in all things Gospel. They are the generals and you are the soldiers. But when generals do not have soldiers, then things go poorly. And when soldiers don't have generals, well, then it's worse. But that is something old, something that has come straight out of Scripture.

When we gather for worship we do it in a way that is not dramatically different than when we gathered for worship 190 years ago. There is a group of people, we pray, we sing songs, we hear the Gospel, and we share each other's joys and sorrows. We have been doing that forever, that is something old. There is a comfort and a security in that which we have done and knowing what we will do. Maybe that latter is more important, comfort in knowing what comes next.

But this church has also been known to dabble in the new. This church began as an expression of Presbyterianism and that aspect of who we were was important, so important that it was necessary for them to become us, rather than us going out to them. My time here has seen a shift in emphasis from sectarianism to community outreach. From defining who we are based upon what we believe that which is different from other Christians, to what we do is different from the rest of the world because we love Jesus, period. That's new. We have embraced the concept of being a Matthew 25 church which has forced us to look beyond our walls and past our needs to the needs of others.

While we have embraced it, it is still tempting to every now and then plunge back into the old and meet our needs while turning a deaf ear to the needs that the community tells that they have. So we then need to be reminded again, we are a Matthew 25 church. In many institutions, and churches certainly are not exempt, when the new and the old meet there can be a not so subtle clash. Within me personally there is a clash of new and old. I love the old way to worship, but the contemporary songs move something in me that I can only call the Holy Spirit, even while the way in which Bruce leads worship I can only say that I am experiencing a self-revival in the presence of the Spirit thanks to his leadership.

Jesus addresses this tension between old and new in a way that might surprise many of us. Let's read.

READ

There are times in the life of the church that we do something and some may wonder: What in the world are we doing? Our Matthew Scripture we find Jesus approached by the disciples of John the Baptist. Remember, these are friends, co-workers, of Jesus and his disciples. John had just been arrested and these poor disciples were a bit like lost sheep without a shepherd and they approach Jesus and ask him: listen, why are we still fasting, and the Pharisees fast all the time, if you and your disciples aren't fasting? Do we still need to fast? The unspoken in that question is really permission by Jesus to not fast. The assumption is that fasting was a hardship that the disciples of John would rather skip.

Now, we know that Jesus fasted when he began his ministry, and we know that he tells us his disciples that there are some miracles that can only happen through prayer and fasting, but the reality is that we never actually see Jesus and his disciples fasting together. This was an incredibly common exercise for a rabbi and his disciple and we read about rabbis and disciples fasting and praying together all the time in ancient literature. But not once with Jesus and his disciples.

Why don't you fast Jesus? Jesus gives an answer that comes straight out of Psalm 9, now not so much the words, as much as the concept itself. Psalm 9 which we read is clearly a Psalm of thanksgiving and celebration and praise. Let's listen to it again. How can someone whose state of mind is this, fast? In fact most commentators call this Matthew story: "The right to be joyful." As Christians we have a right to be joyful, I would say that we have an obligation and a duty to be joyful, but a right works as well.

Jesus, all the other religious folks, including us, fast, why don't you? Because fasting is a sign of the way that we always used to do things, disciples of John. Remember last week when we saw I desire mercy and not sacrifice, steadfast love and not sacrifice and you are so worried about sacrificing and fasting and doing all the religious things that you have forgotten what it means to show mercy.

Jesus begins with that and then moves to the later part of this passage to tell the disciples that he is in the midst of doing a new thing. This whole idea comes from Isaiah 43:19, turn there if you will, where the prophet says: I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it. But Jesus says something that is a bit scary, he says that what I am doing is so new that it has the danger of destroying everything, the new and the old. The new that I bring

requires a new way of looking at things, different from what you have thought your religious upbringing and your cultural Christianity tells you to act in certain life events. It is radical, it is on the edge. And for some, the old is kinda where we want to stay.

For Jesus and his disciples it was the old of the law which was very prescribed and you never had to guess what the right or the wrong thing was, everything was written down for you in the law. Look at Romans 7 where Paul tells us: But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. Nothing is written down in the Spirit except the directive of loving God and neighbor.

When you walk in the doors of the church and come alongside as we live life together, you sign up to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The cost of discipleship is sometimes more than what we can bear so we default to life in the law, that which Christian culture tells us is right and wrong as opposed to that which Christ tells us what is right or wrong. The two conflict, one is the old way and the other is the new way. When we sign up to lead the church, well, then, more than ever, we are called to go and do something new, new in the way that Christ demands.

So as John's disciples ask Jesus, I'm asking us as a church, what are we doing? So much of what we do, and so much of my ministry as a pastor, is to put ourselves in a position where we and our kids can pass the faith down from generation to generation. I began my ministry as a pastor in an orphanage that had written on its main building: lasciate I fanciulli che vengono a me, let the little children come unto me. A lot of things can jeopardize this passing down, but that's not how I live our ministry, worrying about what will jeopardize it, but rather what can I do, what can we do, to make sure that when a child sees me, or a youth, they know that they are a vital, crucial part of this church. If there is anything that gets in the way of that, well, then I have to wonder if that which gets in the way is not of God.

It takes a congregation to do something new, to make it happen, and not just an individual. Over these many years together, we have made a little progress in making that happen together. Look at the children who call this place home. Look at the youth who would identify this church as their home, as their family. You have done that but it has taken years to do it and it will take just as many years, if not more, to ensure that those who come up will raise their families in this church.

But it wasn't easy for Jesus and his disciples to do something new. Just in this chapter alone we have seen him criticized for declaring forgiveness of sins for a man on the lowest rung of society, he was criticized vehemently, and again by the old school religious leaders, for

associating with sinners, and now he is questioned because he is celebrating while the world around him is falling apart. But this is Jesus' new, and sometimes we remain in the old because it is easier to not forgive, it is easier to separate, it is easier to do the religious thing, than the Jesus thing.

Jesus has a different understanding of righteousness than do most people, actually, than does anyone else. But his idea is risky and unsettling and unpredictable, not safe, but good as we hear about Aslan in the Narnia series. The new Jesus ought to lead to a new church. But we know what Jesus says and we believe what he says, when you try to mix the new and the old then you end up with torn clothes and a nice cabernet on the floor.

For Jesus trying to obey the old religious laws and inserting Jesus when you can didn't work. For Jesus here it is all or nothing. We can't choose to forgive when we want or when we need. We forgive. We can't choose to welcome when we want or when we need, we welcome. We can't choose to extend relief to the community as a whole, especially the most vulnerable and youngest in our community when we want or when we need, we just do it. It is not normally practiced this way in churches. I don't practice it consistently in my life. I pick and choose where I want Jesus to fit in.

When we do that, both individually and as a church, well, he tells us what happens, the new, Jesus, will tear a hole even bigger in our old clothes, and the new wine will just burst the new wine skins. We need to have new wine in new wineskins so that both can be preserved. That is the key, isn't it, preserving both? That's our call, that's my charge to you newly ordained and installed, go and do something new.

The Christian is not a person characterized by sorrow, sackcloth and ashes, laments and fastings, but a person of joy who has experienced grace and fulfillment. Even the 1st century persecuted church was characterized by unquenchable joy. We should do the same. Amen.