

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Matthew 9:14-17

Sermon Title: "Weddings, Wineskins, and No Empty Stomachs" (A Journey through Matthew)

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Usually it is the Pharisees who would question Jesus. The Pharisees always put Jesus under a microscope, and could always find some little thing he was doing wrong. They would question him like a lawyer in court, forcing Jesus to say something brilliant that would catch the Pharisees off-guard.

This time, however, it is the disciples of John the Baptist. They are all sitting around the table, enjoying some good food. There is a lull in the conversation, and disciples of John the Baptist take a look down the table toward Jesus. They watch him eating and enjoying himself. His disciples are eating and enjoying themselves. And then they have to ask a question about food. Actually, it is about not eating food but fasting. "How come we fast a lot, and so do the Pharisees, but your disciples don't?"¹ Almost all religions observe fasting. Fasting removes an element that people cannot live without – namely, food. Fasting causes people not to think about what can keep them alive but who keeps them alive. When one

¹ Matthew 9:14.

is not focused on food, one is better focused on God. Apparently, the disciples of John the Baptist are really focused on God, because they fast a lot. Most translations use the word *often*, but the Greek word is closer to the words *all the time*. John's disciples must see the face of God every day by how they boast about their fasting. Their grocery bills must be close to nothing, and their cupboards are always bear. But they don't mind, because they need an excuse not to fast, it sounds like. Four times, five times, six times a week: their stomachs don't see an ounce of food. They must be starving at this little party they are invited to, salivated like Pavlov's dogs as they watch Jesus and his disciples ram food down their open gullets.

Jews and Christians fast, but why? What is the purpose of fasting? When kings of the Old Testament did something bad, and they were called on it, what did they do? Put on sackcloth and fast. When you do something really bad and you know it, or when God has placed you in a corner because you aren't listening to God, the next course of action is to put on something that is itchy and unpleasant, and deny yourself breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Fasting is our way of removing things that bring us comfort –

namely, clothing and food – and coming before God as sorry, humiliated people. As we fast, we see more clearly what we did wrong, and we repent of it. We hear God's voice more clearly, and then we can get back on the right track with God.

This is how Jesus sees fasting, and he sees no reason to do so. This is not the time to be fasting, Jesus says to the disciples of John the Baptist. Now is the time to get out there and serve God's kingdom with our many talents. Now is the time to show mercy to others, help them with whatever they need. Now is the time to think of the spiritual needs of others, not our own spiritual needs.

Jesus says the time is like being at a wedding reception. Weddings are not for feeling miserable – weddings are for celebrating and feeling good. Feeling good about life as God grants it to us. Feeling good about the people God surrounds us with, and the relationships we have that may keep growing stronger. Yes, a time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away. Jesus is already thinking of his own crucifixion and death. But not now. Now is not the time to feel sorry. Now is the time to be thankful for God's mercy and to share mercy with others.

It sounds as though the disciples of John the Baptists have been too busy staring at their navels,

wishing, wanting, pleading for God to show them mercy for their many offenses. They were missing opportunities to share mercy with others. We may do a little too much navel gazing, as well. We all like to have pity parties, and maybe some of us like them a little too much. We want people to pay attention to us, so we act more miserable than we are. Or, maybe we are slightly arrogant about our faith. Again, we want people to notice us, so we act like Super Christians: “Look how perfect I am in my knowledge of God. I have such good standing with God that it is just so mind-boggling.”

While the disciples of John the Baptist are admiring their empty stomachs, Jesus was helping people out. Take a tour of Matthew 9 alone, and we find Jesus forgiving and healing a paralytic, restoring the life of a little girl, relieving a woman from 12 years of bleeding, restoring the sight of two blind men, and helping a mute to speak. Jesus is a busy guy just in Matthew 9 alone, because he is God the Father’s Son who was sent to the world to put the world to rights. God’s ambitious project was launched through Jesus Christ, and God’s ambitious project continues through each one of us. “Those who belong to Jesus are called, here and now, in the power of the Spirit, to be agents

of that putting-to-rights purpose.”² As we spread the healing love of God, it is obvious that we too have been affected by that love. We have been made whole, just as it is our hope that everyone else would be made whole. We cannot help but want to put things to right. God’s endless mercy touches us all.

The old ways of thinking need to go away. The disciples of John the Baptist assume that spiritual growth occurs only one way, through fasting. But Jesus turns that thinking on its head. Nobody patches up an old wineskin with a new cloth. Nobody mends a hole in an old, dirty pair of pants with new, clean fabric. Nobody puts in new sparkplugs in an engine that has had it. Why waste the effort? Neither does anybody put new wine in old wineskins, because the new wine will bust through the old skins. Besides, the oldness of the wineskin itself will seep into the new wine, and it will be tasteless.

I believe Jesus is not scolding the disciples of John the Baptist as much as he is teaching them true spirituality. God has taught us what true spirituality is since the prophet Micah, “What does the Lord desire of us but to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”³ Those disciples of John only

² N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 204.

³ Micah 6:8.

have part of it down, the walking humbly with God bit. There is more, much more: the acting justly and loving mercy bits. Jesus comes to fulfill the law of God, but he does not come to fulfill the old Jewish system of traditions that do not help people to grow as God wants them to grow.⁴

For Jesus, there is more than one way to skin a cat. There is not just one way to grow spiritually, even to act spiritually. For Jesus the sky is the limit in all the ways we may grow in God. Some Christians are just doers: give them a project and they tackle it. They love using their hands. They aren't into sitting in a classroom and reading the Bible. They feel uncomfortable in a discussion group, because they have to talk and think. They limit themselves. Our faith is not one-sided with work, work, and more work. Martha has to sit down at Jesus' feet once in awhile, otherwise Martha creates her own idea of spirituality that is not God's idea. The same with those who love to meet and read and study and pray. They might not like getting out there and working with others. Pastors can be like this: stay in the office and write the sermons, while the church members work in the kitchen and distribute food and organize events, etc.

⁴ Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, cf. 369.

Sometimes Mary has to work at what she learned at the feet of Jesus. Sometimes Mary has to get in the kitchen with Martha and act out the good news of Jesus Christ.

People get stuck with how to read the Bible. All Christians have an opinion, and possibly a strong opinion, of how the Bible was written, how it was inspired, what sort of authority it has, which pieces and parts to take literally, which pieces and parts to take metaphorical. We may argue all these points until we are blue in the face, but they do not get us closer to living out the message. All of those arguments are purely academic, and they never meet people where they are: lost, desperate, clueless, hopeless. The Bible is God's message to us to get out there and serve. It is God's blueprint for us to desire mercy for ourselves and others, and if mercy is not shown then we make sure it is. If things are not right, we put them to rights as God intended. That's all that matters – that is where the rubber hits the road.

Jesus smashes all theories we have invented. He obliterates all assumptions we have made. He widens our understanding, and helps us to see what we have been missing. Our faith, our ministry, our worship is much bigger than we realize, because our God is much, much bigger than we realize.

Our faith should always be full of surprises. We should be elastic enough to be stretched in different directions, always open to new ideas of how to grow and worship and serve.⁵ Especially as God provides those new ideas. There may be a time to fast, but let it not keep us from getting out there. There may be a time to get out there, but let it not keep us from sitting quietly with God. There is always somebody to help, since they tend to pop out of nowhere and demand our time and effort. There is always our God to draw closer to, since there is so much more to know. Our faith, our ministry, our worship is much bigger than we realize, because our God is much, much bigger than we realize.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1*, cf. 346.