

Future Focused God, help us to see beyond these words and hear beyond our human capacity. Let your call on our lives be clear and our willingness to follow, be undeniable. Amen

I know that you know, what it's like to have a new minister show up and begin to shift the way you do things – new hymns, new versions of the Lord's Prayer, new ideas of how things should or could be done – so I suspect, that you might be able to find a little empathy for the Pharisees in today's story.

It's not always easy trying to understand why something should change or who has the authority, and the right to change them.

The Pharisees are religious scholars. They know their stuff. They are steeped in tradition. They are the people you turn to when you want to know “the right way” to do things.

As for Jesus, he's the new kid in town, and, it seems, he has thrown tradition out the window. He's doing everything “wrong” according to the Pharisees. He's doing the work only God can do! He's proclaiming forgiveness of sins, and not just proclaiming it, but enacting it!

He's attracting the “low lives” of society, and not just attracting them, but encouraging them, socializing and eating with them; going completely against the laws of temple cleanliness.

Even his spiritual practices seem to be lacking as he shows no regard for fasting and in fact, seems to say that this isn't the time for such observances.

It's all too much to take in! Too much change! Too many unanswered questions! Too little clarity! And it doesn't help, that Jesus' answers to these questions come in the form of riddles and rhetorical questions.

Maybe, if Jesus would just speak clearly and concisely, everything would go more smoothly for him. If he would just explain to everyone who he is, let those demonic spirits from last week's reading reveal his truth. But in the gospel of Mark, Jesus keeps his true identity to himself. It's as if he wants people to believe, with their eyes and their hearts, rather than with their heads. It's as if he wants our experience of him, of his teaching, of his presence, to be enough.

But in order for such belief and faith to take place, we need to be able to set aside our former ways of thinking. Not discard them; we don't want to toss the baby out with the bathwater, but to simply set our traditional assumptions aside in order to make room for the new thing that God is revealing.

You see, God is always revealing something new. Faith in God is about being willing to move in a forward motion, toward what is coming, what is possible, what is needed now and in the future.

Think about it, our two sacraments in the Christian church are baptism and communion. Through each of these sacraments we proclaim ourselves as being made new. We are not restored to the old way of being but made new, always preparing for what is to come.<sup>i</sup>

A life of faith requires setting aside old wineskins, giving thanks for the amazing work they did, and opening up the new wineskin so that the new wine has an opportunity to breathe, ferment and age as it should.

Just a word about wineskins. When we think of them today, we think of those nice little leather bladders that we can throw over our shoulder and take skiing with us. But in the time of Jesus, wineskins are made from the hide of a goat. As the wine bubbles and ferments, the hide stretches to accommodate it, but in the process, the hide becomes too brittle to be viable for a second usage. To reuse it is to risk it splitting open from the pressure, thus losing all of the good new wine.

Some of our traditions and habits, are like this. They can be stretched to accommodate shifts and changes, but only to a point. Then we have to look at new ways to accommodate our new learnings for a future yet unknown.

Whether personally or in the church community, this past year has taught us a lot about the new, unexpected ways that God makes the presence of the Holy known. Who would have ever dreamed that we would spend so much time socializing, worshipping and living out our faith online?! Covid has forced us out of our traditions and habits, and God has led us into new ways of being.

This coming year promises more of the same. Not only will we continue to be stretched through social interactions, worship and ministry that accommodates personal distancing, but within the United Church congregations in Kelowna, we will also, depending on the amalgamation vote, be stretched to welcome, recline and feast with a new community of people; a larger body of worshippers.

We will also have the opportunity to explore ways to reach into the future and minister to those who do not yet know about us, our beliefs, and our radical welcome.

This process is going to require that we set aside old wineskins and prepare for the new wine that is about to be poured out. It is calling us not to simply patch the holes that are starting to appear, but to create something new, something that will be future looking, even while we respect and honour the traditional ways of being.

It's going to require trusting God, learning from the radicalness of Jesus and following where and how the Spirit leads us, into the future. A future that we cannot yet see, but where God is inviting us to come along and participate in the journey.

On the way, there may be times that we feel more like the Pharisees, questioning, challenging, voicing concerns. It may seem like too much to take in! Too much change! Too many unanswered questions! Too little clarity!

And the answers we receive, well, they may seem more like one of those roundabout responses that Jesus is so good at it with no clear, concise answer.

In the midst of it all, may we remember that all of life is a journey of faith; a journey of renewal, whereby we are being invited to let our experience of Christ, our understanding of Jesus' teachings, and the knowledge of his presence, be enough for us to trust in the One who is leading us into a future we can't yet see. A future that is ours to create. May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> Delio, Ilia. *The Emergent Christ. Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*. Orbis Books. NY. 2011