

“The Messiness of Re-Creation”

Matthew 9:9-17; Isaiah 65:17-22 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 11, 2023

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might embrace the messiness of the Spirit's work in our midst and persevere in hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Ordinarily on the day of our annual Congregational Meeting, I share a sermon titled “The State of the Church.” I’m not doing that today. It just didn’t seem like the thing the current moment is calling for. The state of our church is very much still in the process of becoming, so trying to sum it up formally didn’t seem appropriate. But maybe that’s okay. A thing that is still in process is a thing that’s much easier and more inviting to get involved with. Your presence here makes a difference. Your participation will affect what happens.

So instead, I want to look at some lessons Jesus is offering that can help us find our way forward most faithfully and effectively. I do believe God holds a hopeful future for VLM, and I hope that our excitement about that future is growing. There is much that is possible. Our job in this moment is to open our eyes and our hearts to those possibilities and welcome them in the ways most likely to make them fruitful. That discernment – the figuring out what approaches are most likely to lead to fruitfulness – is what I think Jesus is trying to teach us today. In our scripture lesson from Matthew, Jesus is getting harassed, again. It’s coming from multiple directions this time, from both the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist. The

Pharisees want to know why Jesus would bother or even dare to share meals with tax collectors and other generalized sinners. The disciples of John seems to want to know why he is eating all – though they're pretending to ask about his disciples and not him directly. "We fast. Why don't you all fast?" As if fasting and self-sacrifice are the only measures of holiness.

The answer Jesus gives both the Pharisees and the disciples of John are related. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," he quotes to the Pharisees from the prophet Hosea. This is not the moment for fasting, he tells John's followers. There is more to our faith than dour righteousness. Know the moment, he seems to tell us. And then he gives us these two very practical metaphors to show just how important this is.

I think it's fair to say that one of these metaphors gets a lot more play than the other. "New Wine" was even the name of a small group ministry here at VLM not too many years ago. It sounds fun and exciting, effervescent even. On the other hand, you don't usually hear anybody naming their program "Pre-Shrunken Cloth." And yet, both of these metaphors are pointing to the same thing: the importance of meeting the moment with the appropriate tools, or more broadly, the appropriate attitude, expectations, plans, structure, etc.

Just to make sure we understand the metaphors, let's walk through each of them. You have a well-worn piece of clothing. You love it, but it's wearing out in certain spots. You aren't ready to consign it to the rag pile, so you want to get it patched. This garment has been worn and washed many times, so the fabric has

pretty much shrunk as much as it's going to. So what Jesus is saying, is that you shouldn't patch it with a piece of fabric that is going to shrink when you wash it, because if you do, it will pull at the edges of the patch and make the hole you were trying to fix worse. What you need is a piece of fabric that's been properly prepared, washed a few times over, so that it's a good match for the fabric it will be joining and mending. This is a case of you don't want the hole to change size, so you need something else that isn't going to change size to fix it; the thing that needs mending needs to be matched with something well-suited to its situation.

The wineskins, however, are the opposite situation. New wine is still in the process of fermentation, which means it's bubbling and gassy and needs room to expand. Those old wineskins have already been through that process with previous wine, so they've already stretched out to their capacity. If you put new wine that still needs space to bubble in them, they're going to burst, just as Jesus said. And the wine and the wineskins will be wasted. So in this case, you need something supple to hold the new, fermenting wine, like wineskins that are new and still stretchable. This is a case of the thing is still in process, still figuring out where it's going, so it can only be held lightly, with lots of flexibility and room for growth and change.

These are both situations that come up in church life often. There are parts of a church's life that have been around for a long time that need to be matched with hearts and actions that are well-prepared and spiritually mature, so they don't rip and tear at long-cherished practices. There are also new things emerging that can't be held

too rigidly, or they will be destroyed and cause damage as they go. The trick is knowing which thing is which.

It might sound at first as if the wisdom of these metaphors was lost in Isaiah, as he declares that everything from before is going to be forgotten and there will be all new things from now on. But then a few verses later, he declares that the days of God's people will be "like the days of a tree." Now, one thing we know about trees is that they are sturdy and firm, strong enough to hang swings from, useful for building things, and rigid enough that they're usually going to win a collision with a car. But the other thing we know about trees is that they are inherently flexible. You've seen the pictures: a grove of trees all growing in one direction because of the force of the ocean breezes, the tree whose roots wiggle around in all directions to find the best access to water, even a tree that grew around a bicycle! You see, trees have a very different sense of time than we do. In a human moment, they may seem hard and immovable. But over the course of their lifetimes, they are adapting and adjusting in all sorts of ways, always seeking the water, the wellspring of life.

This is also a lesson for us to apply to our current moment, as we wonder what "the state of our church" is. Where do we bend, how do we adjust, when do we stand strong, what do we support? And I want to encourage us today, to come back to Jesus' first teaching in today's passage from Matthew to help figure that out. Go and learn what this means," he said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." It might sound like he's talking about religious practice there, and he is. But he's also talking about

something that we too often leave out of discussions of religious practice: people. He's talking about people and how our religious practices affect them. If the practices of your faith are excluding people, he asks, what is the point of them? God has asked us to love and cherish all God's people, so if our religious practices are shutting them out, we must be doing something wrong. He puts it another way, with another metaphor. It's hard to ignore the absurdity of a hospital that only admits healthy people. Why would anyone build such a thing? And yet, far too often, that's the kind of church we try to create. Or at least, it's the kind of church we pretend to be. We look at others' success and assume we need to leave our failures at home, unmentioned. Or we look at other people pouring out their problems and because they remind us of our own vulnerabilities, we wish they would hush.

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” God tells us. And can you imagine applying that philosophy not just to others, but also to yourself? Do you sometimes catch yourself believing that a life of faith is supposed to be hard? That if church is fun, we're probably missing the point? I occasionally fall into this myth. And it's not that there aren't things about a life of faith that are hard. Our world is very broken, and living a life of love is often challenging. But the thing about church is that we're here to do those hard things together, which ought to make them easier. And also, that much of the time, we're focused on the presence of the Bridegroom here in our midst, so yes, we are actually partying. Mercy is a wonderful blessing, and it needs to be celebrated, whether we're sharing it with others or letting ourselves receive it.

I'll be honest, when I first tried to conceive of what I would say to you today, what "the state of the church" is, the first word that came to my mind was "hassle." And then I realized that was more about the state of the pastor than the state of the church. This has been a spring full of what's felt like never-ending hassle. All the repercussions of our office break-in in February, the tech challenges raised by that and the ongoing needs of being a church that operates remotely, a new copier contract, credit card issues, a no longer supported AED device that needs replacing, a dying laptop. It has often felt like I am nothing more than a Hassle-Handler-in-Chief lately. And I hate hassle. It's made it hard to get a handle on the big picture of where we are and where God is calling us as a congregation. It's exhausting. And I need a way out, but preferably one that doesn't leave a string of dropped balls in my wake.

So when I feel Jesus' invitation to offer myself mercy, it almost makes me cry. When I know that God is inviting me back into God's time, the kind of time measured in tree roots rather than deadlines, it makes it possible for me to breathe again. When I remember that gratitude is the antidote for the frustration caused by endless hassle, I can access those "sighs too deep for words" again. Because I'm not alone, trying to handle all the hassle and be church all on my own. So many of you have worked through the grubby details with me. So many of you have stepped up and taken on new roles in our ministry lately. So many of you have offered me mercy, instead of demanding that I work more. I am so grateful to be part of a congregation that is so deeply rooted in love.

What is “the state of our church?” It seems to me that we are still caught up in the messiness of re-creation. The Spirit is moving here. We are still trying to figure out if what we need is a piece of pre-shrunk cloth or a new wineskin that will grow and stretch, and which one goes where. We are adapting, in bunches of tiny little slow ways, like that tree that stands strong but is constantly adjusting to everything around it. We are doing it together, as church, grounded in the love of Jesus Christ, who calls us to mercy and joy and generosity and compassion. We are discerning how to be who God is calling us to be, here in this moment, in this place. It’s not clear. It’s not something we can delineate in several tidy bullet points. It’s more like an art project, one that’s been started over a few different times. But it’s beautiful, in the moment, in the process, and in its potential. And I, for one, am grateful. Hallelujah and Amen.