

Second Sunday after the Epiphany - January 14, 2024

Mark 2:13–28

“When a patch just won’t do”

1. When our sons were little I was the champion of knee patches.
 - a. Not only did our Indianapolis Public School have a uniform code which meant that we had only a limited number of choices for school pants, our School also happened to be a Montessori magnet School.
 - i. When you're talking about elementary school and Montessori education that means kids spend a lot of time sitting on the classroom floor, a lot of time on their knees, just basically a hardship condition for uniform pants.
 - ii. And our boys took these garments to the edge of the limits of the fabric.
 - iii. That plus me being cheap makes for a situation where I had to find better uniform pants or better ways to fix soon-to-be holes on their knees.
 - b. Enter patches for the knees
 - i. Iron-on patches to be exact
 - ii. Somebody must have been paying attention because the patches available at local stores matched the colors of the pants that were the required uniform for IPS schools.
 - iii. Khaki blue black.
 - c. Now I tried to put myself in the place of the boys and think how I would have felt if my mom had taken my hard-worn pants and ironed on patches on the knees quite visible for the world to see.
 - i. I was pretty sure that I would have been embarrassed
 - ii. and so I tried to do the sensitive thing and either I bought their pants with reinforced knee patches already as part of the pants
 - iii. or I preemptively applied the patch to a non-existing hole ironing the patch from the inside and therefore not visible to anyone else but our boys.
 - iv. Let's just say that patches only postpone the inevitable
 - v. Patches were only a temporary solution and not even a solution but just the way to extend the use of the garment.
 - vi. The holes still came.
 - vii. But for the most part patches did a good job.
2. In our passage today, which mentions patches on worn out clothing, Jesus is trying to make a point which pushes us to think about how the old and the new coexist, especially in the context of faith and the traditions involved with faith.
 - a. The passage today is actually a series of smaller passages strung together
 - b. They speak of the experience Jesus had as he became better known and people flocked to him
 - i. The trouble was that the people who flocked to him were not just “good” synagogue-going people, but also decidedly NOT “good” people in the eyes of the religious establishment
 - ii. They're described as “tax collectors and sinners”
 - iii. And it was a demographic Jesus was quite committed to!

- iv. It seemed like he would much rather hang out with them than with those who felt they were “right” or who could judge other people for not “being right”
- c. And then there is the question of whether Jesus was doing “faith” right
 - i. That is to say, it seemed to the religious scholars that Jesus wasn’t keeping the expected rules or following the expected traditions from of old
 - ii. The three examples we get are
 - 1. whether he was “ritually” unclean by virtue of hanging out with the sinners and tax collectors
 - 2. why his disciples were not fasting at the same times that the other really religious people were fasting
 - 3. and finally why Jesus seemed not to enforce with his disciples the rules of not working in the Sabbath
 - iii. In other words, for a teacher of the scriptures, it looked to some like Jesus wasn’t reading from the script.
- d. So Jesus, in his very Jesus-y way, answers with a story. Several stories in fact, but I want to focus on the one in the center of the passage, about patches and wine.
 - i. And here I want to express my gratitude to insights from a new commentary on Mark from a series called Wisdom Commentary, which focuses on feminist biblical scholarship.
 - ii. What we would do well to remember is that when Jesus was speaking to the crowds, his listeners, his followers and his disciples were both women and men.
 - iii. And a clue we have is actually that conversation of patches.
 - iv. It’s the women, always the women, who in ancient cultures were more often than not the key leadership
 - 1. in a community, in a family, to keep things going,
 - 2. to be attentive to the needs of the people,
 - 3. and, as my mother proved, to be able to stretch a dollar so it provided for the family.
- e. Jesus probably was looking straight at some of the women in the crowd when he said the bit about trying to use an unshrunk piece of cloth as a patch
 - i. The women knew that would be dumb! They knew the right way to extend the life of a garment.
 - ii. In ancient Palestine, experienced seamstresses would of course have known that a patch on a garment (the way to extend the life of the garment!) needed to be preshrunk before being sewn on the torn cloth.
 - iii. In other words, these women would have known by experience that there had to be a dialogue, if you will, between the old and the new.
 - iv. The “new” patch needed to be prepared to be “new” on the old torn garment, in this case by first washing it and preshrinking it so that the repaired garment would not get torn up worse when it was washed.
- f. And similarly with the wine example, actually.

painful rifts, to honor the new wine of justice by being proactively flexible to embrace change which God is ushering in.

Sources:

Wisdom Commentary. Mark. By Warren Carter. Barbara E. Reid, OP, General Editor. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press. 2019.

The Anchor Bible. Mark. By C.S. Mann. New York: Doubleday. 1986.

Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. By Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1992.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story of a time when you've experienced / witnessed change happening in society – and society pushed back.
2. Jesus spoke of a new patch on an old garment, of new wine and old wineskins (Mark 2:13–28). Based on his message, what do you think those representing “new” and those representing “old” felt about Jesus' statements?
3. Where do you see (or hope to see) the next big “mending / healing” in society? What can we join that effort?