"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
 - 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.
 - 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.

- i. Women would have known how to make wine (some scholars ponder if women first discovered it).
 - https://www.guildsomm.com/public_content/features/articles/b/tanya-morning-star-darling/posts/women-in-wine-history https://lizthachmw.com/winestars/the-ancient-connection-between-women-and-wine/
- ii. And if they knew wine so well, they would know how to store it safely.
- iii. Wine skins weren't just a one-use kind of container.
- iv. "[Wine] Skins were reused for storing wine but after a while lost their capacity for expansion and could burst, losing the wine. New wine needs fresh skins... or, more accurately, it needs at least older skins that still have elasticity to contain it..." (Carter, p.56)
- v. So here it is the "old" which needs to accommodate the new. That is, the reused wine skin still needed to have flexibility to welcome the new wine.
- g. Then the commentary brings it all together to explain that Jesus was trying to bring reform to religious systems not by throwing them away but by engaging in a renewing conversation that required flexibility from the "new" and the "old"
 - i. "Some old practices (fasting) are inappropriate for a season but then become appropriate. The new – adequately prepared (shrinking) -- renews the old and ensures its survival and continuing contribution (garment). The old has continuing usefulness for a while, but renewal is necessary (wine and wineskins)." (Carter, p.56)
- 3. The kinds of reform and evolution which Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other giants of the Civil Rights movement championed required this kind of dialogue between the old and the new.
 - a. Symbolically, to pre-shrink the patch or to expect a reused wineskin to remain flexible are not betrayals of principles, but the needed human interaction to make lasting change.
 - b. The argument of civil rights leader then or our argument today is to say that people should have the same rights and opportunities, regardless of their skin color, or national origin, or gender, or sexual orientation... That's is simply a restatement of the philosophy which founded this country (that all people are created equal) but practically enacting it, translating it even, in society.
 - i. King understood you can't just "patch" it and be done
 - ii. He prepared anyone in the civil rights struggle for what he called non-violent direct action.
 - iii. The patch needed to be ready.
 - iv. Think of it like preshrinking the patch so that, when finally applied, violence would not then tear up the existing garment, the existing society.
 - v. But the Civil Rights movement also had the crucial expectation that the country had to remain sufficiently flexible (like a reused wineskins receiving new wine) in order to adapt and stay true to its deep principles (not to the mockery made of those principles of freedom by legal discrimination against African Americans and immigrants, against all women, etc.)
- 4. The interaction of the old and the new requires a give and take, a dialogue of mutual respect and flexibility: to extend the life of the old garment of culture with sensitive healing of

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?