

## THE TRUE RENEWAL

I do not have a lot of connections to wine; it was never a favorite drink of mine. But I have some deep and abiding connections to this parable Jesus told about putting new wine into new wineskins. It seems to me to be a profound image of what causes me endless trouble and confusion. If I cannot tell when we are shifting to something really “new,” then my life gets more and more twisted and contorted as I try to move on without making the necessary adjustments and changes. For as long as I cannot decide which I prefer and what I truly want in my life – the new or the old – my life becomes an increasing shambles.

In many circumstances, to be sure, we can have both the new and the old, side by side. They even enhance each other and bring us better perspective. “Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue” – how very charming and peaceful that can be. But clearly Jesus is not talking about that kind of reality. Jesus chooses imagery that does not allow for any pleasant or happy compromises. If you put new wine into old wineskins, the fermentation process bursts the skins that are now too brittle to handle the drama – the dynamism – that is taking place. Compromise – sharing the road – is not possible. We lose both the old skins and the new wine. The old skins burst and are useless. The new wine spills out on the ground and is lost.

Have any of us ever lost some of our old wineskins? We were doing just fine with some of our cherished beliefs or attitudes or purposes. But in the light of the new truth dawning upon us, they were too brittle and too confining to contain what we were now seeing. They could no longer be contained in the light of new truth dawning. I hate it when that happens. Even if after a while we become enthralled and deeply grateful, in the moment of the revealing we are hugely distressed. And when a major pillar of our beliefs – of our understanding of what life is for and about – is dislodged, then we have to rethink everything that was built on and depending on that pillar.

I suspect that was what was happening when Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days after His baptism. I suspect that was what was going on when Paul went back home to Tarsus for ten years not long after his Damascus Road experience. New wine is a huge pain in the ass, even if it turns out to be one of the greatest blessings we have ever known. New wine is turmoil and challenge, and it requires a reworking of everything we have known and everything we were trying to accomplish. Some people tell me that the Christian Life is just one

long, smooth glide from glory into glory. They were raised in a Christian home and just went from being loving and faithful to being more loving and more faithful. Well, I was raised in a Christian home – that is, a Christian home that was trying to survive in the context of a broken world – and things were going on all around it that never made it easy. Even so, I cannot imagine what it is like to go through life without ever encountering new wine. “*You must be born anew.*”

At the very least, we can get glimmers of what it must have been like for the people of the early church to try to put the new wine of the grace and mercy of a truly loving God into the old wineskins of a legal approach to being accepted by God based on behavior and the proving of our growing perfection. It does not escape everyone’s notice, in fact, that a high percentage of our religious approaches and beliefs still today are based on the old wine and are still contained in old wineskins. One of the purposes of many of our religious institutions is to make sure that no new wine is allowed to touch the sacredness of our creeds and long-held convictions about virginity, about poverty, about sexuality, or about what it means to serve God.

I have friends, some of them UCC clergy, who insist that we are living in what they call a “Post-Christian World.” Clearly this implies that the world used to be Christian but now it is Christian no longer. That, in turn, means I missed it. We had a grand and glorious “Golden Age” when the world was Christian, but somehow I managed to stay unaware of it and now it’s too late. The world has moved on past its Christian phase or era, and now I am supposed to adjust, abandon my Christian hopes and loyalties, and find some way to “make the best of it,” now that the world around us is no longer interested in Christian truth or values or purposes. At least that is the message I seem to be hearing from those who claim that we are living in a “Post-Christian World.”

Only, I still want to know: When was it that we were a “Christian World”? The first three centuries of the existence of the Christian church were not easy. When the Emperor Constantine stopped the persecutions and made Christianity the most acceptable religion in the Roman Empire – is that when we became a “Christian World”? Maybe so. There were large segments of the world that neither knew nor cared about life in the Roman Empire, but let’s not quibble about that. Did the *Roman Empire* really become Christian? Roman legions took the banner of a Christian cross into battle with them, but did that mean they were all followers of Jesus? Many historians have

suggested that the conversion of Constantine diluted the content and significance of Christianity beyond all recognition. Christianity became a state religion, but it was no longer Christianity. It was now easy and comfortable. And you know the old phrase: The Christian church can survive anything except prosperity.

Or maybe we were a “Christian World” during the Dark Ages. We certainly had cathedrals and monasteries and ecclesiastical hierarchies, and church officials had more authority than ever before. But it was also an age of fear, guilt, superstition, cruelty, and judgment. If we give people of love enough political power, what happens to the love? That’s not just my question; it is a question we hear being asked all around us, all of our lives.

When was the world a “Christian World”? Some of us remember with nostalgia the community where we grew up. There were exceptions, but most of the people we knew went to church. If they missed a Sunday, they were apologetic about it. Those who had survived the Second World War seemed eager to get back home and recreate a safer life, with homes and schools and churches like they had remembered when they were not sure they would ever get back home.

For a little while we were building churches faster than we could keep up with. And filling them too. But before long it became evident that we were back into another one of Jesus’ parables. We were the seed that was falling on rocky ground, or sometimes among the thorns. Of course, there were sincere people among us, but this was no rebirth of Spiritual Life in America. We built buildings, but we did not build spiritual communities. Within ten years we overthrew the “blue laws,” and sports became a greater religion than Christianity. The audiences attending most churches began to get smaller, and more and more people – having never tasted any true spiritual awakening – began to proclaim that they did not need Jesus or, in fact, *any* “organized religion.” Some of them went “east,” and some of them simply focused more and more on the ambitions and pleasures of this life, just as most humans always have.

In the mid-to-late 1970s, I was a Pastor in Redlands, California. In Redlands there is Plymouth Village, a smaller version of Pilgrim Place, a well-known retirement center for UCC Pastors and Missionaries in Claremont, California. The rules and purposes have been expanded in the years since, but at the time, Plymouth Village housed a delightful collection of Ministers and Missionaries who had served our church a

generation or two before me. They were faithful church members, and they added a great deal of depth and knowledge and experience to our fellowship. For the most part, they represented the well-educated and deeply involved liberal leadership of our denomination in the early twentieth century.

Now they were retired, and they were not causing any overt trouble in the church. They had more seasoning than that. I appreciated them, and they were mostly appreciative of my teachings and sermons. But numerous times one or another of them would express wonderment and concern that I was not more actively pushing some of our denominational programs. In the whole field of what we used to call “social action,” they considered me negligent and lacking. Mostly we just sidestepped it and went on with things we could agree on more easily. But from time to time we would come close to a real argument. Not a “we might leave the church” kind of argument; just a “you seem pretty aware in other areas, why are you so dense in this one” kind of argument.

Then one day we hit a phrase that seemed to clarify the issues between us. I said to Kirk Dewey (who was the spokesman), “You have lived through two great wars and the Great Depression, but you still seem to believe in the ‘Myth of Progress.’” The “Myth of Progress” is not a twentieth-century conviction; it is a nineteenth-century conviction. “Of course I do,” Kirk shot back. “I cannot understand why so many people have stopped supporting our many important causes and endeavors when we are right on the brink of some major breakthroughs that would bring our world to never-before-seen blessings and benefits.” Meanwhile, if you paid any attention to any of the statistics, all these “programs” were dwindling by the carload.

Toward the end of our discussion, Kirk said to me, “You still believe in individual transformation, and you preach with fervor and from the Scriptures about the impact Jesus can still have on our lives. My friends and I love to hear it and love to be reminded of it. But you don’t go on from there to tell us what action we need to take to bring justice and peace to our world.”

Kirk Dewey, by the way, had been a Conference Minister in Montana and had a reputation far beyond anything I would ever attain. “Kirk,” I said, “we are not going to bring this world to peace and justice. The ‘Myth of Progress’ is false – it is a false dream. It is a deceit because it does not take evil seriously. What do you think

Satan will be doing while we are all off cooperating to bring into reality all this progress you dream about? For instance, before the Second World War, pretty much your whole generation believed in genetic engineering. Don't we remember what Hitler did with that?"

"Well," said Kirk, "I don't really believe in Satan. I think Satan is just an excuse for not taking our responsibilities seriously enough." And that was as far as our conversations were ever able to go. No Satan – no Savior. And if we are all good people who just need to try a little bit harder, you can count me out. I do know and believe that Jesus still transforms *individuals*, and He sets many of us to significant tasks and purposes – purposes, by the way, that we would never attempt apart from the presence of His Holy Spirit. But I am also deeply convinced that we are not going to perfect this world or ourselves or each other – not in the one brief lifetime we are given here. People who believe that get discouraged. I do not believe it, and so I do not get discouraged.

Vast hordes have given up on Christianity and the church because they do not see any evidence that we are going to bring a final peace or prosperity to the world. I agree with their conclusion, only I never expected Christianity to bring that kind of benefit. In fact, if I see signs of that kind of benefit being proclaimed, I start sniffing the air for the smell of sulfur. For me, however much Jesus was engaged in the life going on around Him, He is about an *unseen* spiritual reality; a Kingdom *not* of this world; a rebirth – a being born anew – that changes our orientation to everything we see going on in the outer world around us. That outer world is no longer where we base our reality or our hopes.

Therefore, I do not expect the signs of "renewal" to be outer signs, like churches getting bigger again, the frameworks and organizations of our denominations getting grand again, or a higher percentage of our population or of our leaders professing their faith in Jesus.

I know a little bit about what happens in the lives of individual people when they encounter the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. I have no need to transpose that into some claim that we are about to solve all the problems of the world going on all around us. That is not what I care about. That is not where I live. If I can do a friend a favor in this outer sphere, I will often attempt it. But it will not last, it will not do as much good as either of us are hoping for, and it might even make things worse along the way. But that's just a given; that's the way it is.

But when a person encounters the Holy Spirit, they begin a whole new and different LIFE. It begins but does not end. It unfolds no matter what is going on in this world around us. That person discovers gifts and abilities they did not even know they had, and they come into a whole different level of focus, patience, purpose, and awareness. *That* is what I care about. *That* is where I live.

So the signs of renewal that I look for, though most of them we will not easily see or recognize, are the small groups being formed by people who are drawn together by their awareness of the presence of Jesus. They gather to keep talking about Jesus and what they have learned from Him, and what they have experienced of the presence and guidance of His Holy Spirit. And they gather also to be available for others who are coming into their own New Life in Christ Jesus. Humans have a great need to gather and talk with each other around any common interest or experience. Have you ever known a gardener who did not like to talk with other gardeners? Or a birder who did not like to talk with other birders?

Well, it's like that when people come awake to the presence of the Holy Spirit, except the need and the desire are far greater. People who realize that the Holy Spirit is real and is actually relating to them are eager first of all to find some reassurance that they are not crazy. "This really is happening? Somebody else recognizes and will admit to similar experiences? Whew! Thank God." Secondly, it is a whole New Life opening up, and any information from others is more than welcome. Thirdly, when people awaken to the presence of the Risen Christ, there is a certain "loneliness" that goes with it. That's a contradiction, to be sure; we were never before so aware of the love of God. Yet there is a loneliness – a feeling of estrangement from other people around us. We need to find an oasis in the desert – a colony, however small, of others who know what we are talking about and experiencing. It is like finding a tiny island in the midst of a vast, secular sea. And that is what I think finding a church – an ecclesia, a faith community – is really about. It is a clan, a group, a family of people who encourage and support each other on the Christian PATH – who walk with each other, insofar as that is possible, in the Christian WAY of Life. And that WAY is one guided by the Spirit.

Nevertheless, any such fellowship of people, if they ever identify themselves as a band of people wanting to follow Jesus – that is, any faith family – will be instantly and continually bombarded by endless efforts on the part of both friends and foes and other forces trying to

undo their purpose, their commitments, and their reasons for coming into being in the first place. I hope you all know that by now.

Sometimes, of course, it will be the simple and obvious assault. Can we pay our bills? Can we gather enough support and unity to survive? The array of rules and obligations – from insurance, to laws of incorporation, to city building codes, to safety requirements for any public gathering – is humungous in our time. Peter and Paul got beaten and thrown into prison, but they never got closed down because the Fire Department thought their circuit breakers were not adequate or their fire extinguishers had not been serviced recently enough.

However, those are the overt and simple challenges. After that come the endless attempts to sidetrack the faith family into a hundred good causes, good efforts, and caring purposes that leave the fellowship with no time or energy for the support or sharing of the Christian Life itself. “We must help others,” but never toward faith – only toward food or clothes or money, or anything that does not allow time to focus on our relationship with Jesus. DEATH BY DISTRACTION is Satan’s stock-in-trade in the world of the modern church.

Jesus told a parable about new wine. It has endless applications. It is every bit as profound today as it was on the day He first told it. We will skip the part about the new patch on old clothes, since most of you no longer use cloth that is un-Sanforized. But lots of you still know something about wine, though you think of wine in a bottle instead of in a leather skin. If the skin was old and brittle, the fermentation process would be too much for the skin to handle. It would crack and break, and the wine would be lost and the skin would be ruined. Everybody in Jesus’ time knew this as a matter of course. Who would ever put new wine into an old skin? Well, what if you did not have a new skin available? What if you just had a *little* new wine left to process, and you did not want to take time to butcher some lambs and then cure and sew the skins? What if you thought maybe one or two of the skins you had on hand were new *enough* – not totally new, but new enough that they might just be flexible enough that you could get away with it. Who ever heard of humans trying to get away with something?

But this parable has far more power than anybody realized at first. Nobody who heard it from Jesus realized at the time that the New Wine of His Message – the New Wine of the LIFE He was inviting us into – would burst the skins of Judaism itself. It maybe should not

have come to that. Paul spent his whole life teaching and preaching that it should not and did not need to come to that. But it came to that. Most of us can still feel the power of the parable, especially when we try to pour Jesus' New Wine into our *own* old skins: our old values and expectations and prejudices and attitudes. The old skins are still bursting all over the landscape. Jesus hawks His wares – “New Lives for old” – but most of us still try for a while to cram the New Life into the old patterns and realities of what we think is safer and more reliable.

Then Jesus teases us. “I know you,” He says. “I know how you think. You will keep saying, for as long as you possibly can, that your old wine is better than my New Wine. And that is even believable, for a short time. You have to *live* my WAY for quite a while – in trust and in patient endurance – to realize how my WAY is light years beyond anything your way can contain.

“So come into my WAY, come into my church – come into my Disciple Bands where you can support and love and care about each other in this broken world, while you give my New Wine a chance to age and cure and lead you into the spiritual realms of my FATHER, who loves you beyond your wildest imagination.” Nobody was saying that in Jesus' time.

“Only, never let anybody tell you that my WAY is soft and easy or that it is doing ‘what comes naturally.’ My WAY is a way of discipline: the WAY is straight and the gate is narrow that leads to LIFE. The distractions are endless and serious, and the Adversary plays them to the hilt. You must follow ME: keep your eyes fixed on ME. Never imagine that you have learned it all or that you can let down your guard.”

We live in a world where people are actually proud of all their distractions. If they can fill their calendars full and take on more obligations than any human can possibly keep up with, they think this makes them noble and worthy of praise. And most of them are seldom if ever asking for guidance or permission from the Spirit about anything they are doing. They think that if their intentions are good and their motives are caring, then it automatically means that God has to approve.

Our whole society is sick with overwork; schedules too busy for true prayer; activities so scattered that nobody can ever get calm or peaceful or focused on what God wants. The signs of backlash are



depression and more and more drugs to substitute for prayer. There is no longer any Sabbath – a day of rest. And more and more people wonder why God seems vague or distant or far away.

Pruning has become one of the top needs in our time. Nothing helps everybody, and nothing solves everything. But lots of us would find huge improvement, huge refuge, huge help if we would begin to prune our lives in the Spirit's presence and by the Spirit's guidance – not our common sense.

So we are, at least for a while, incorporating a new piece into our Sunday worship. It is called TIME WITH THE SPIRIT. It is simple, but not easy. Every Sunday, after the sermon, we will set aside a few minutes of silence. During that time, each of us will attempt, with the Spirit's help, to frame two vows for the coming week.

**THE FIRST VOW:** something we will try to accomplish in the next week with the Spirit's help.

**THE SECOND VOW:** something we think the Spirit is asking us to take out of our lives – a promise we need to unmake; an obligation or responsibility that we took on without the Spirit's permission; a person who is costing us too much time or energy with no benefit that we can comprehend (this does not mean God has abandoned them; they are just not part of our assignment anymore). You have a "delete" button on your computer. Do you have a "delete" button in your prayer life?

God prunes us to make it possible for us to bear more fruit. If we will not allow ourselves to be pruned, we bear less and less fruit, and the quality of the fruit diminishes. We begin to grow more and more "suckers" – that is, limbs that use up lots of nutrients and lots of time and energy, but which have no benefit or purpose for us or for anybody else.

Do we want God to prune us? Is it okay with us if Jesus pours some New Wine into our lives?