

Scripture: Mark 2:18-22
Message: Party Time with Jesus
February 11, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
Pastor Jack Van de Hoef

I grew up in a fairly traditional home, with respect to matters of faith and lifestyle. There was a clear definition of what was right and wrong. There was a clear understanding of how faith was to be lived out. There were clear messages of what behaviours were acceptable and what was not. I guess I could say that the rules were clear, the boundaries defined and a life of faith and trust in God was meant to fit within those rules and boundaries.

If I think back to my years of growing up at home, I don't think I would use the word "fun" to describe what it was like to be a person of faith. Not that it was all negative. There would certainly be positive words that I would use: meaningful, sincere, consistent, honest. But not necessarily 'fun.'



So when I first came across the book by Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, I was intrigued. "Party" was not the word that came to mind when talking about faith. A party was something frivolous and fun, even a bit wild or silly. I remember, as a child, attending the traditional wedding receptions or parties of our church family, where silly games were played and family members sang ridiculous songs and people laughed. That was not my picture of church, or faith. Faith was something much more serious.

I share my personal experiences because that's what comes to mind as I read this story from Mark 2. John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Remember that this story comes after the story about Jesus eating with Levi and his tax collector friends. From a story about *with whom* to eat comes a story about *how often* to eat. The Pharisees were convinced that not only the company you kept said a lot about your character, but also your diet would influence character, especially as it related to fasting.

In actual fact, the people were only required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. But we know from other sources, and from the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector going to the temple to pray (see Luke 18:9-14), that the Pharisees would fast twice a week.

What they are implying with their question is that fasting was an important characteristic of living out one's faith and trust in God. Fasting showed the sincerity of one's commitment.

One's character is revealed by the people you hang out with and the evident practices of your faith.

In other words, living out your faith is about doing the right things in the right way. So, Jesus, why are your disciples not doing the right things in the right way?

Jesus answers their question with a question: Why should they fast when it's actually time for a party? Jesus uses the illustration of a wedding. If you know anything about a Jewish wedding, you will know that it is a wonderfully joyful occasion. The celebration would often last for a week, with the finest food, drink, and fun available. To fast at someone's wedding party would not only be unnatural; it would be rude and selfish.

Jesus' response to the question of the Pharisees is to suggest that, as long as Jesus is around, it's time to celebrate. In the lifetime of the disciples, Jesus *was* taken from them. He died and was buried. They were filled with sadness and grief. At that time, fasting would have been appropriate.

Then Jesus rose from the dead. He's alive. He ascended into heaven and has sent the Holy Spirit to live in us, as the reminder and promise of his presence. Jesus promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth....He lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

Therefore we confess in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, "in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit [Jesus] is never absent from us" (Q. A. 47).

Listen to Jesus' question again, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?" Jesus is with us. It's party time with Jesus!

Our life of faith, our relationship with Jesus is not meant to be serious, sombre, uptight and narrow-minded. It's not a boring life of gloom filled with religious rituals and rules, "doing the right things in the right way." The life of faith is more like a wedding, a joy-filled relationship with Jesus.

Yes, it's great to see smiles in church. Yes, it's so good to hear laughter, even in church. Next Sunday we will celebrate communion. I intentionally use the word "celebrate." Jesus is here, with us, now. He invites us to his table to touch and taste the elements of bread and cup as reminders of his presence.

Are the guests of the bridegroom solemn and serious when the bridegroom is present?

Is the Lord's Supper only a solemn ceremony of remembrance of the death of Jesus? Or is the Lord's Supper a wedding feast with Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as his bride? Is it a celebration of the presence of the living Lord, who died to pay for our sins and rose again to give us new life? Life to the fullest (John 10:10). God sent Jesus into the world that everyone who believes in him will have life (John 3:14-17).

Jesus said, "The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:33-35).

It has been said that all a person needs to be happy is duct tape and WD-40. If it moves and shouldn't, use the duct tape. If it doesn't move and should, use the WD-40.



Some people look at our life with Jesus in a similar way. "If I'm doing pretty good, I only need Jesus to just "patch up" some problem areas of my life. Like a bit of duct tape to fix this, and a bit of WD-40 to fix that. Jesus can fix me up here and there. For the rest, I've got it pretty well together."

The truth is, Jesus didn't come to patch things up. He came to give us a complete overhaul, a new heart, new life.

Yes, there is awe in the presence of a holy God. But think of the awe at a wedding in seeing the meticulously dressed bridegroom and the awe-inspiring beautiful bride. The awe in God's presence is not something solemn and frightful. It's a joy-filled wonder at the glory and presence of God.

Yes, there is a place for quiet reflection in the presence of God. But that's not a quiet of fear and uncertainty, but a quiet of hope and promise and trust.

Why do you go to church? Is it to socialize, to fit in, to look religious? Or do you go to church to praise and worship God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who created and creates all, who loves and wants us to love?

Why do you pray? Because you were taught to do it before meals, maybe because you want something, or so that you will look religious? Or is prayer a sincere communication between you and your Lord?

The season of Lent begins this week Wednesday, and some people choose to give up

something for Lent. It's a type of fasting. Why might you do that? Because it's that time of the year again and you are expected to? Or do you fast as a way of humbling yourself before God and renewing your trust in him?

Why do you take communion? Because the rest of the church does it? Or do you take communion because you truly are thankful for the life that is ours through Jesus? Do you take communion because you rejoice in your relationship with him, and with other believers?

Jesus then continues his answer to the Pharisees by talking about patching clothes and making wine.



Perhaps as a child Jesus had seen his mother patching clothes. It was something that was very common. An old cloak or shirt has a hole to be patched. Where do you get the material for the patch? You don't take it from a new piece of cloth. After the first washing, the patch of new material will shrink and tear the old garment so that the damage will be worse than before.



Or think about the process of making wine. In Jesus' day, the skin of animals was used to preserve wine. A new or fresh skin would have lots of stretch or elasticity. As a new batch of wine was poured in, that wine would ferment and stretch the skin. After some time, that stretch would be gone. The wineskin would be fine for the fermented wine already in it or it could be used for water. But if new wine was put in an old skin, the new fermenting process would cause the skin to burst. The old skin would be ruined and the wine spilled out.

What does patching clothes and making wine have to do with fasting or celebrating? Jesus had come to fulfill the old system of laws and sacrifices and ceremonies. Jesus was bringing a new life of grace and freedom and joy. Those who follow him and accept him are changed, transformed and in their lives there is no room for legalism or strict observance of ritual for the sake of ritual. It's not about doing the right things in the right way to gain favour with God. Jesus did not come to patch up the old way. He fulfilled it and brought in a completely new life. A new faith, says Jesus, will be expressed in new ways.



The joy of the gospel, the good news that Jesus saves us from sin, is not meant to be boring and drab and legalistic. It is an exciting, joy-filled, life-giving message of grace that lifts our spirits and gives us new hope every day.

So do we try to patch this new life into old clothes or keep it in old wineskins? Have we replaced Jewish legalism with a set of rules and traditions of our own?

I used to read this passage from the Bible, hearing these words of Jesus, and think he's only talking about change. But Jesus is not just talking about change. He's talking about living the joy of a life of grace in his presence, every day.

It's party time with Jesus. Not just in church. Every day, every moment of our life is a life of faith, living with Jesus. Celebrate his presence. Smile in his love. Laugh in his grace. Invite others to know the joy of trusting Jesus and walking with him.

I'm thankful for the foundation of faith I received from my parents and the faith community of my childhood. I'm also thankful for the joy and freedom I have come to see in a life of faith in Jesus.

What a party! What tremendous fun we have to know Jesus and live for him! To God be the glory!

Amen.