

October 18, 2020 Sermon – Mark 2:18-22

A short time before this pandemic began in 2020, the three churches I am part of were talking about making changes to the way they do worship with more shared worship services and other changes that they hoped would help all of them be a more vital part of the communities their church buildings are located in. The majority of the people who are part of these churches recognized that they needed to make changes in order to not only survive but to thrive and continue to share the Good News of God's love for all people and all of creation, made known in and through Jesus Christ.

As part of that process, I was going to draw on the book, Who Moved My Cheese, written by Spencer Johnson, to illustrate the need for change. It is a delightful story or parable that is easy to read and understand with some profound insights found in the simplicity of it. In fact, I had prepared a skit based on the book and found people to participate in it for a presentation to the congregation's and then we went into lockdown. The skit remains in my files ready to be used at a later time. The book describes two small mice named Sniff and Scurry who live in a maze and when the cheese they always enjoyed is missing one day, they sniff and scurry around the maze looking for new cheese. It also describes two small people named Hem and Haw who live in the same maze and when they discover the cheese they enjoyed eating missing, they hem and haw about what they should do about it. I encourage you to pick up a copy of the book and read it if you want to gain some insights into the inevitability of change and how to go about making change.

Last Sunday was Thanksgiving Sunday and many families had non-traditional Thanksgiving dinners and gatherings as government policies and health regulations restricted the number of people who could gather together to share a meal and family activities. I'm sure that more than a few people managed to find ways to gather with their families anyway, as our family did a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving in an outdoor setting when the weather was warm and COVID-19 numbers were still lower. We recognize how fortunate we are to be given the gift of being able to enjoy an early Thanksgiving gathering in this way, but many did not and experienced a big change in the way they participated in Thanksgiving this year.

However, still feeling she wanted to do something for a traditional Thanksgiving family dinner and gathering on the Thanksgiving weekend, my wife, Sue, decided to purchase all the traditional Thanksgiving food she prepares most years and cook up a Thanksgiving meal with

turkey, dressing, potatoes, pumpkin buns, and more, and we would deliver it to our three children and their families on Thanksgiving Monday. It was a wonderful thought and gesture and would take a lot of work on her part to prepare it, even though one of our children, who is a firefighter, had a traditional Thanksgiving meal at his fire-hall on Thanksgiving Sunday as he was working that day and one of the firefighters is quite a good cook. Another one of our children and her husband had already prepared a turkey dinner for her family which they had enjoyed on Thanksgiving Sunday. Our third child was working on Thanksgiving Sunday and was looking forward to her mom's thanksgiving meal. All three children were looking forward to the meal their mom was busy preparing for them.

The point of this story is that it can be very difficult to let go of traditions and make changes in the way we live and do things. We all have certain attachments to things that we find difficult to let go of, even when it might be helpful for us to do so. I'm not suggesting that we have to let go of the way we do traditional Thanksgiving dinners and family gatherings in the years to come, but to insist on the traditional Thanksgiving dinner and gathering this year may not have been the best way to handle this pandemic. Thankfully, the numbers of COVID-19 infections in Canada is still quite low and those who did gather were probably safe, but what about in the months and winter ahead if numbers continue to increase and we are indoors more often? Will we insist on having traditional Christmas dinners and gatherings if it remains risky to do so or will we be able to accept the changes that it might be helpful to make, at least for this year?

The author of the Gospel of Mark was familiar with change and he included these words of Jesus in his gospel: "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins." (Mark 2:22) The message is clear – there are times that we need to accept the changes that are upon us, including new ways of doing things, if we hope to do well. If we insist on clinging to the old ways of doing things, we may do more harm than good and end up losing much more than if we had made the change.

My wife, Sue, found a way to hang on to a portion of the Thanksgiving tradition that is important to her while also ensuring our family remained safe and followed the health guidelines. Both of us missed the traditional family gathering on the Thanksgiving weekend but are fortunate to have had the opportunity for an early Thanksgiving gathering and to at least see our family and talk with them. I'm sure some families were not able to do that but I hope they also found ways to enjoy Thanksgiving this year. But what about all the other things we

normally did that we cannot do now? Such as gathering in our church buildings for worship or in our workplaces with fellow employees or in our schools without the many restrictions now in place that keep the children from playing with their friends as they would like to or whatever? The reality is that change is being forced upon us whether we like it or not and we better learn how to handle these changes if we want to continue to enjoy life.

In the book, Who Moved My Cheese, Sniff and Scurry adapt to the changes in their maze quickly while Hem and Haw do not. The result is that the two small mice end up doing much better than the two small people. Again, you should read the book if you want to understand Spencer Johnson's story or parable better. I've read it a few times when change comes my way and did so again recently as this virus has made its home with us in this world and "moved our cheese."

What I've been reminded of is that change does not have to be a bad thing. In fact, our churches were already talking about the need to make changes but were unsure what those changes should be or look like. Now, we have had the opportunity to experience some of those changes as we've gone to on-line worship, more communication through emails, phone calls, video chats, and other means, as well as an increase in curbside visits and ways of caring for one another in non-traditional methods. I've missed the traditional church worship service and fellowship gathering just as I have the traditional Thanksgiving meal and gathering but I've also appreciated the opportunity to worship in a new way, and I've learned it suits many people's schedules and way of life better than a traditional Sunday morning experience. In fact, our church members have made it clear that they want the on-line worship services to continue even when we do get back into church for in-person worship services. I'm sure not all of the members feel that way but the majority certainly do. What this has taught me is that by having our "cheese," which has been the traditional worship service, moved, most of the members have adapted quite well, which I am thankful for.

There is something within all of us that sometimes causes us to think that the old ways and traditions were better than what we have now, but this way of thinking often forgets about the difficulties and struggles that were included in the old ways. For instance, there is much talk by certain people about the "good old days" or "making something great again" or "returning to the way things once were" without remembering that those "old days when things were great" were not so great for everyone. While those in privileged positions who benefitted from the "way things were" usually want them back, there were many people who

lived in those times who were oppressed and hurt by those “old” ways. We must remember that the old days and ways included slavery, the lack of a vote by women, the favoritism and special treatment for the wealthy and powerful, and many other things that rewarded those who remember the so called “greatness” of the old days at the expense of the vast majority. Do we really want to go back to those days? I don’t!

It is precisely this way of thinking that Jesus spoke out against. He was a revolutionary of sorts, although one who promoted non-violence when encouraging changes in society and in the hearts, minds, and spirits of people. Jesus saw the oppression of the many by the few in his home country and called for change. He wasn’t a fan of the “old ways” of doing things. Jesus experienced the heavy hand of the powerful and called for a change in the power structure of society. He wasn’t hoping to make the Roman Empire greater than it already was. Jesus witnessed the religious hierarchy reward its priests and elders while offering far fewer benefits for those who were not part of the priestly circle. He called the religious elite hypocrites and condemned their way of operating. These were not the “good old days” that Jesus wanted to see more of. What Jesus wanted was to put new wine into new wineskins. He wanted to see change happen but knew it could not while the old wine was still being drunk from the old wineskins or by attempting to put the new wine into the old wineskins.

I think we have an amazing opportunity to take advantage of the changes now being forced or thrust upon us. Because of this pandemic our “cheese has been moved” and we can choose to look for new cheese or remain in limbo as we long for the old cheese to return. The unknown is whether the old cheese will ever return and, also, whether it would still be good for us if it does. Maybe the old cheese has gone moldy or lost its flavour. Maybe our taste and sampling of the new cheese has helped us to realize that the taste of the old cheese had grown stale or rather bland.

What things in our lives is it time we change? Not just in our church worship services and the way we do ministry but also in our personal lives and work careers? Have we become stale and out of date in the way we do things and in the beliefs we carry? Have the protests for Black Lives Matter and the call for defunding the police opened our eyes to the injustice that has been happening for hundreds of years because of the “old ways” society operated? Has the civil unrest in countries throughout the world helped us to admit that the countries that considered themselves “great” are not really that great at all when it comes to equal rights for all people? Has the increase in unemployment because of the pandemic forced us to

acknowledge that we need to find a way to ensure that all Canadian citizens have a basic income so that they can feed themselves and their families and live in a warm home and safe environment?

We may want to think about Jesus' call to put "new wine into new wineskins" and reflect on what we may be doing now that should be changed. What about how we use our finances, resources, skills, and time? Are we using them in ways that are making life better for not only ourselves, but also for others? If not, what can we change to make that possible?

Sue chose to make a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for our children and their families but to deliver it in a new way. Is she trying to put "old wine into new wineskins" which Jesus says hardly ever works? I don't know but I do know that she made that meal with love and I wonder if that's what really matters. If we all do whatever we do, motivated and inspired by love, it may be possible that even the old wineskins will be able to hold the new wine until we've been able to get the new wineskins ready.

