

Wine tasting: 2 Corinthians 3:1-6; Mark 2:13-22

by [Douglas R. Loving](#) in the [February 16, 2000](#) issue

As the gusty winds of change blow unpredictably through the church, Jesus provides an intriguing sound bite in the Gospel lesson: “One puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” Fresh wineskins, as faith communities experiment with alternative worship rituals. Fresh wineskins, as local congregations adopt new administrative structures. Fresh wineskins, as denominations reshape their organizational patterns and purposes.

The image isn’t exactly indigenous to contemporary life. Not many wineskins turned up in post-Christmas sales this year. Few folks know that grape fermentation produces gases which can burst an aging and worn-out skin. Even Jesus’s analogy of patching an old cloak with a new piece of cloth is unfamiliar in today’s world of preshrunk and synthetic materials. Eugene Peterson recasts the passage to offer a contemporary slant: “No one cuts up a fine silk scarf to patch old work clothes; you want fabrics that match. And you don’t put your wine in cracked bottles.”

The meaning shines through. Old containers won’t suffice for the dynamic and life-transforming Jesus who is present with us today. God continues to “make all things new.” Christ invites us beyond the ruts we’ve worn, the truncated lives we’ve settled for. Embrace the new; relish God’s continuing creative energy!

Many who heard and followed Jesus found their lives transformed. Others found his presence too radical and threatening. He stirred up controversy in the religious community when his followers no longer observed the cherished tradition of fasting. Their aberrant behavior challenged the daily ritual which had been an expression of faithfulness for generations. This change was a dramatic demonstration of Christ’s message: the messianic community cannot be contained by old patterns, or be defined by past rituals, no matter how treasured they are. God is indeed doing a “new thing.” The Messiah is here, and business as usual, even spiritual business, needs to be interrupted.

The disruption of revered patterns spawns anxiety in any age. The congregation I serve has been wrestling to discern what changes in the church, what fresh

wineskins, are needed to keep us faithful and open to the Spirit. A new organizational structure has emerged, using clusters and teams rather than committees. Though traditional worship services continue in our simple 19th-century sanctuary, we will soon offer an option. A band (no organ, please!) and the latest in sound and video technology will make the old building rock.

Some people are not sure that they approve. They feel displaced by contemporary music, lost without familiar structures. I understand those responses, and sometimes wonder myself where we're being led.

The anxiety can drive us to seek protection: shut out the new, intensify efforts to sanctify the status quo. But the churning uneasiness can also fuel creativity, engender excitement, nudge us toward a fresh appreciation of the Spirit's guidance. The quest for new wineskins can open doors to fresh ministries and vibrant witness that might never have emerged if discomfort hadn't mobilized us.

The postresurrection faith community discovered this truth. Acts 15 chronicles the controversy that swirled around the Jerusalem church. Could its structure be reshaped as a "new wineskin" inclusive enough to welcome the gentiles? As the leaders leaned into that debate, their resounding yes sent the good news spilling into far corners of the world. Today too we need to keep searching, testing, experimenting, praying. Though we don't always know whether the wineskins are the right size and shape and sturdiness, we do have some clues. Are lives being changed in our midst? Do emerging structures/ministries/programs carry and pour out the new wine of Jesus's sacrificial love?

Are we drawn to care not only for ourselves, but for the world? The challenge of new wineskins draws us out beyond preoccupation with innovative worship and redesigned organizational charts. Jesus kept company with tax collectors and other marginalized folks. He antagonized his skeptical questioners. They didn't much like his behavior.

Functionally, it appears that we don't much like it either. Instead of embracing those beyond our doors who are hungry for good news, we often remain contained within our traditions, focused on in-house concerns. Who is truly righteous, who can be ordained to what position? We burrow into the rules, comb the books of discipline. Preoccupied with high-profile church dramas, we find our energy drained, our passion chilled.

Meanwhile, the world waits for some redemptive sign from us. The church prays for the 20 percent of our population left unprotected with no health insurance, but its voice is muted. Community food pantries are well stocked, but we have precious little experience living with and loving those people who have to fill their grocery bags there. Nor have we found a way to modify our economic priorities so that no one needs to go begging for food.

Seeking fresh wineskins for this new wine challenges us all. The journey can release ingenuity and open doors to new ministries. It may also reconnect us with God's dynamic, transforming movement within each of us. Paul's image captures it well. He reassures us that our identity is not defined by traditions, patterns, rules. "You are a letter of Christ . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God."