

Good morning.

Until her passing about a year ago, Phyliss Tickle was an author and authority on religion in America and a much sought after lecturer on the subject.

I heard her speak at the last Blue Ocean conference I was at in Ann Arbor.

Besides having a fun name Phyllis was an expert on religious landscape and she talks about the progression of religion.

Tickle shares that about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity - is changed in order for new growth to occur.

Phyllis goes through the history.

She calls each transition a rummage sale -- in which the church cleans out it's attic and three things happen --

First, a new and vibrant expression of Christianity emerges;
second, the dominant institutionalized expression of Christianity is reconfigured into a purer form;
and third, the Christian faith is spread into new territories and demographic areas.

Phyllis spoke about how for a long time there has been a major question in church -- where does the major authority lie? Who has the final say of who's in and who's out and who's right and who is wrong.

For a thousand of years or so that was the Pope and religious leaders .

And then the reformation happened in the 1500 hundreds. Then there was a shift in the Catholic church from authoritative teachers toward the Bible. And all of a sudden people who rejected the Catholic church became interested in what was known and Solas Scriptura or only Scripture, or the Bible. And for the next 500 years the Bible became the ultimate authority for Christians.

The thought was that we can figure out what the Bible says about anything and we can take it literally -- and we have developed a lot of systems on how to think about the Bible. It seems we think we can understand and become expert interpreters of what the Bible says.

The downside, however, is division in the church. Lots of division over what people think the Bible is saying.

But Phyllis and lots of other church leaders have really begun to think there is another shift in where the authority lies. And they are saying the authority is shifting back to Jesus himself.

That the leader of the church Jesus, who is alive, is giving his spirit as he promised way back when. It's been experienced along the way and the thought is it's even more alive now.

SO it's not solas scriptura, it's sola Jesus, Jesus alone. And our task is to learn to hear from him and experience him and understand what he is up to.

Those have been pretty radical shifts in the course of history.

My own faith journey has the same sort of progression – of course on a much smaller scale.

My faith life began in the Catholic church when I was young. It was wonderful as a kid -- Easter Egg Hunts, coloring in the pews, CCD. But then my mom had to go -- it was no longer a space she felt comfortable in and we moved on to a Baptist church.

At the Catholic church, we didn't read the Bible at all -- all of our info about God came from the priests or a booklet used to teach a class. But this new church was different. There were Bibles in every pew! It was new and my mom was excited for sure.

And I found Jesus for myself for the first time as a young girl. It was exciting and slightly terrifying at the same time -- but there was VBS and plays and KIDS CHURCH!

It was at a place I began to learn about the Bible. I felt like I had space to learn and study the Bible on my own. I had a Bible for the first time -- it was pink. I had some trouble understanding what it said - but I tried to read it.

And after that I left organized faith for a little while -- in my teen years I was so involved in school and sports - I decided to do religion on my own -- it wasn't perfect but I had some sort of foundation for a prayer life and rules based religion. I had learned enough

about how my church at the time interpreted the Bible to live under the rules that I thought made me a Christian. So, I figured I could do that on my own.

After college though I really wanted more and that's where I found churches that were into this Sola Jesus thing -- and talking to Jesus became a huge part of my life. Which I think is what Jesus is after for all of us.

We are starting a series today on the parables -- these are stories Jesus tells us in the Bible that don't quite make sense at face value -- they are a little quirky and take some time to get the point. Which Jesus seems to do for a reason.

Because Jesus wanted people to spend time with him. And still does. So let's spend time with Jesus and see what he is saying to us right now through one of his somewhat odd - stories. He's very intentional about telling stories that many will be confused by?

Why might that be? I believe it's because Jesus wanted people to spend time with him, to wrestle through these stories with him and not settle for surface level teachings that don't go very deep and don't require a relational connection to a living God to really make sense. And just like I think Jesus was inviting his followers to press into connection with him more with these parables, I think he's inviting us into that too...."

Let's read it together --

¹⁸ John's disciples and the Pharisees sometimes fasted. One day some people came to Jesus and asked, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't fast?" ¹⁹ Jesus replied, "Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can't fast while they are with the groom. ²⁰ But someday he will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. ²¹ And who would patch an old garment with unshrunk cloth? For the new patch shrinks and pulls away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger hole than before. ²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. The wine would burst the wineskins, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine needs new wineskins."

There is a lot happening here in this very short piece.

Let's break it down.

((point 1)) First let's talk about fasting. At this time the Pharisees -- who are the religious leaders people would look to at the time for religious guidance -- they were the people who were very devout in following all of the religious law -- they would fast twice a week

- which was their tradition. In the Torah - or the Old Testament of the Bible - fasting was a once a year practice -- turns out the Pharisees thought, well if one day year is good - then twice a week is really good!

John the Baptist's is a religious guy who comes right before Jesus -- he's setting the stage for Jesus to start his ministry -- his followers were fasting as well -- and the pharisees and John and his followers are seemingly be on the same page at this time when it comes to fasting. These seems like the normal religious practice or tradition at this time. Fasting twice a week seems like the good plan.

Fasting is a practice used during times of mourning -- mourning the loss of someone or mourning one's own sin or shortcomings. It's the practice of abstaining from food to make room for God. Saying no to your hunger and saying yes to God. So the idea is when you are hungry, you pray.

We would want to think that John and his followers and Jesus and his followers would be on the same page about this -- but not yet. John is in prison first of all -- so he might not be aware of the exactly what Jesus is up to right now -- OR John's followers may have been fasting because John is in prison at this time -- so they are mourning with him.

Either way, the people Jesus was hanging out with - sinners and tax collectors were most likely not fasting - at all. That would not have been a practice for the non-religious type. So if Jesus and his followers are going to parties and dinners with the sinners and tax collectors -- there's a good chance it would be on one of the days that were traditionally set aside for fasting -- Jesus is too busy partying and getting to know people to take time for that.

Also Jesus is saying He is the groom -- so why would you fast at a party -- that does not sound like fun -- and Jesus is saying he's the main event -- the honorary -- so it would be super rude to fast while you are with him. There will be plenty of time for fasting when he is gone.

Back to the idea of fasting to be closer to God -- God is here with them -- Jesus is walking next to the people. His ministry is just beginning at this time and he is performing miracles and people are curious. They are not exactly sure what to make of him yet -- but people are coming to listen and hear what he is offering.

So I think Jesus here is saying there is a time and a place for fasting -- and for Jesus and his followers - it's not now. He's not saying fasting is bad -- Jesus fasts in the desert.

But what I think he is saying is sometimes fasting is a great spiritual practice -- but not all the time.

((Point 2))

Which brings us to these two quirky stories Jesus tells. One about cloth and one about wineskins.

We are going to focus mostly on the wineskins today -- but let's talk about this cloth for a minute.

He uses these to illustrate his point, but it doesn't exactly make sense at face value.

First he talks about cloth.

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear becomes worse.

WHAT? Ok, I am not a seamstress - I can barely sew on a button. So at first glance I think, why not? A cool new patch might look hip and awesome on an old garment. Jesus is so serious about this though -- he says no one -- so I did a little googling -- and it turns out - there are actually a few different ways we can look at this.

- If you put new cloth on old cloth before it is shrunk - it will get wet and shrink and tear again - making your effort and the garment useless.
- You can ruin the nice new cloth by putting it on something old and worn.

So Jesus seems to be saying that - the piece from the new cloth will not match the old - and it seems to point to the fact that what Jesus brings is so new that it can't simply be combined with the old. To do so would be to destroy what is new and to put two things together that don't fit.

So maybe the tradition of fasting twice a week - doesn't work with how Jesus is stepping outside of his BOX - and connecting with people a Jewish teacher would not normally hang out with. Jesus is bringing something new - and with that maybe there is some new perspective on how to embrace and experience spiritual practices.

But let's focus more on this next parable.

The other is about wineskins -

Wineskins were bags made of skin or leather, used for storing wine in Jesus' time. As the new wine fermented and expanded, it would stretch the new wineskins. Putting new (unfermented) wine in old wineskins, which had already been stretched, would result in the bursting of the wineskins.

Have you ever had a leather bag -- or shoes -- and they smell so good when you first get it. And it's nice and clean and tight - and then over time it starts to stretch and wear out and those awesome shoes you had now look quite worn.

Well that's what Jesus seems to be talking about with these wineskins. They work great the first time - but the second time they don't work as well.

DOC MARTENS -- they used to do that thing where you could get a new pair if they wore out. They knew what the leather would do and wanted the leather to look good -- wanted their product to be nice.

It seems like that is what Jesus is saying is that not everything works all the time.

From that Baptist church I sort of fell away from organized church in my teens and did my own thing. I prayed a lot, read my Bible and put into practice the things I had learned at both my previous churches.

But eventually that wasn't enough and I needed more. New ways to connect with Jesus. That's when I found those churches that were talking about the Holy Spirit. It was new and different --

The music was loud, the sermons talked about connecting with a living God and there was a lot of praying/prayer request sorts of things. AND groups of young people got together to read the Bible! That to me was amazing and really energizing. Being from the Northeast I thought you had to wait until you got older to follow Jesus - turns out I could just talk to Jesus on my own.

It was so new and exciting. My faith was revived in a way. It was a new wineskin. And a good one for my faith journey.

Just like my mom needed us to change churches and find a new way of connecting with God -- And like I needed to find a new space to find Jesus for myself -- I feel like Jesus is saying -- YES -- that's part of this living faith.

Here's how I see it. Wineskins are faith practices or spiritual practices -- and wine is the abundant life and connection to Jesus he is offering.

For example. I used to pray for a half hour every morning. Before I got out of bed I would pray for everyone I know. Sometimes just speaking their name to God - sometimes praying for specific things -- but then one day I just woke up and I didn't want to anymore -- the thought of saying this prayer felt hard and I didn't want to do it.

AND I was worried -- oh no -- what is happening to my faith life - what do I do? It can be quite unsettling at first. I thought I needed to just push through and do it, I thought. If I don't do this, I will fall away from Jesus and that won't be good -- or yikes - Jesus won't love me the same or my friends and family won't be well and cared for through prayer.

Yikes! That's a lot of pressure. And from what I had been learning about Jesus -- that didn't seem to be the way he wanted me to feel.

And I realized there were other ways I could connect with Jesus. There's music and art and reading my Bible and praying with people.

This wineskin parable is told in two other books in the Bible -- Luke and Matthew. Luke adds one more line.

He says - **39** No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is good enough.'"

I didn't want to just give up what I was doing because it felt safe and comfortable and in some ways necessary to my journey of faith. Which is what I think Jesus is saying in this verse --that I could just say the old is good enough and power through -- but in that I would be struggling and probably not have any real connection to Jesus because I'm just going through the motions.

What do we do with all of this -- what Jesus is offering in this.

Jesus is offering something different than that -- He is offering a lifetime supply of new wine. No box - relationship with Him - that keeps our faith alive.

I. Practical Suggestions/Application/Take It Home

So if Jesus is making the pitch that we need to keep our faith fresh -- that it's an ongoing, life giving, relationship with him, how do we know when we need to change our wineskins - how do we know if we are stuck.

Here are a few ideas.

First, **we forget why we are doing it.**

Like when I was praying every morning for everyone I knew -- I had these boxes in my mind and I would go through them every morning. And for a while I loved it - and then all of a sudden (well it felt all of a sudden to me) I could not for the life of me remember why I was doing this -- why I thought it was helpful. And so I let go.

Second, **we're judgmental of others.**

For a minute nothing felt right.

I moved to Madison to learn from a female pastor. I did an internship at a church that is part of the Blue Ocean network and an apprenticeship. It was really fun at first. I was meeting a lot of people and learning about what they do in Madison as a community. But I had several OLD wineskins that were formed and I was being a bit stubborn about letting them go. Instead of just openly letting go of what I was doing and jumping into what was happening - I was too busy trying to convince others to try out my old wineskins. I was stuck. And it got messy. And I began to judge what was happening around me.

Not all of my old wineskins were going to work in this community -- just like Jesus not fasting while he was with people who didn't fast.

My personal wineskins were fine -- but I couldn't bring everyone else into what I was doing.

And slowly my wineskins fell away and I picked up some new amazing things.

But there was a painful process in there of letting go of what I thought was important and even at times necessary to following Jesus – those things weren't necessary.

The only thing that was necessary was connecting with a living God.

Third, **it feels like a chore**. I have a friend who's dad fasts every Thursday. It's just his thing. It brings him closer to God and is a spiritual practice for him. I once thought -- I should do that too! I enjoy fasting -- when it is Jesus led-- and if it works for him, I thought it might work for me. But WOW it did not. I picked a different day of the week and went for it. It went really well for about a month - after that it was a struggle -- and all I could think about all day was that I was hungry. Which it seems when I fast with God's nudges - I'm hungry but it doesn't usually feel like i'm saying no to food -- it feels more like I'm saying yes to Jesus over and over again throughout the day. So now I just fast when it's a conversation between God and I and I feel him nudging me to fast.

Let me close with some ideas of where we can get fresh wineskins --

1. Ask Jesus for ideas

We can pray and expect Jesus to answer us back.

Some ways we can do this is through conversational prayer -- Which we have talked about recently. Maybe when you're walking or driving, just try having a conversation with God and see how he answers you.

You can also try journaling and see if God speaks to you or if anything comes to mind that you might like to try.

He surely has some ideas and it seems like it's his plan in the first place to just have this living relationship with us.

And maybe for a while that is your new wineskin. Since moving to California, my schedule has been all over the place and Cody and I have just been trying to figure out how to live well here. That has made my spiritual practices kind of sporadic -- a little of this -- a little of that -- WHICH IS UNCOMFORTABLE for me. But I have so much rich tradition and foundation to fall back on that it's ok.

And I have running -- that is my peaceful quiet time. I can completely zone out and practice silence in some ways. It can truly be spiritual for me.

And it's also a place I feel free to talk with God openly and honestly.

2. Ask your friends.

What are they doing to connect with Jesus -- what has worked for you or a friend in the past -- any ideas?

There is listening prayer -- which we talked about a few weeks back. That is something you can do on your own -- listening to God, maybe journaling with Jesus or taking a walk and talk with him.

Or pray with a friend. Maybe they hear something helpful that connects for you and helps you feel connected to Jesus.

There are daily devotionals you can read -- including a great one by Father Richard Rohr who we talk about a lot here. Rohr is very big on silence and meditation as well as dealing with our ego and seeing the world in some really great perspectives --

((LIKE THIS ONE))

This devotional can make my day! But it can also be long and challenging to find the time to read it.

So I get another email everyday -- and it's just a verse of the day -- one verse. Now I don't always think taking a verse out of the Bible without any context is always helpful thing to do (sometimes it can lose it's meaning or be confusing) But often times it's just a verse about how much God loves me -- and that I can get behind.

There are many more out there as well.

Podcasts -- sermons.

The Daily Examen is a great way to prayerfully review your day. Some people call this highs and lows or consecration desolation -- basically you talk about the best thing of

your day or where you experienced God the most and then where or how you experienced him the least. This is a great thing to journal or share with friends or family.

3. Go with something that's already happening around you or something that has worked in the past.

Jesus said his followers would fast again. Just not right now. Maybe there is something you used to do that would fit with where you are now.

Like my morning prayer -- now that my mornings are different -- I might go back to that.

Also - we have small groups here. Many of them practice some sort of spiritual practice and it's a great place to ask for ideas - and it can be a spiritual practice in itself.

What works for others might not work for you. But God is gracious in bringing those new containers just like he did for the followers of Jesus in his day...