

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

It turns out my initial assumptions about this service were misguided. I have for years assumed today's accusation that the disciples are drunk on new wine is meant to reference what Jesus says about new wine in the gospels. In several of the gospels, Jesus says old wineskins can't hold new wine. This statement positions him as a change agent. What Jesus teaches and preaches, what Jesus lives and encourages, comes into unavoidable conflict with the status quo. The status quo has to go and the Kingdom of God Jesus brings near is clearly superior. Given this prior precedent, I've always assumed Pentecost's talk of new wine hearkens back to what Jesus had already said; with the thought being that the Holy Spirit continues to build up God's alternative to the status quo by being an agent that brings out the old and brings in the new. But it turns out this characterization of the Holy Spirit cannot be sustained on the basis of our reading from Acts' mention of new wine.

As I only learned recently, different Greek words are used to describe the new wine that Jesus talks about and the new wine our reading from Acts supposedly references. It turns out that today's reading from Acts doesn't refer to freshly fermented wine at all. Rather than talking about new wine, it talks about sweet wine. In the ancient world, sweet wine was evidently akin to the caught blood that begins the butchering of a pig. Sweet wine comes from the first drippings of processed grapes and it was often consumed in the morning during the days of Jesus and his first disciples. Thank goodness I did a little research before proceeding with my initial preaching plan. Without that research, I might have said things about our reading from Acts that its original language does not sustain. But just because I can't position the Holy Spirit as a change agent on the basis of our first reading's reference to what should be sweet wine rather than new wine doesn't mean that I have to abandon the claim that when the Holy Spirit shows up it's out with the old and in with the new. There's a lot in our reading from Acts which travels in this direction.

As an initial example, let's key in on how our reading from Acts associates the Holy Spirit with wind. This is a very old association. In Old Testament Hebrew, the same word can be translated as wind or spirit or breath. It's something to remember when reading through the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. By way of example, in the first chapter of the Bible, we often hear of the wind that hovered over the primordial waters as the creative process began. The word translated as wind can just as easily be translated as spirit, as in the Holy Spirit. On the day of creation, God uses the wind of the Holy Spirit to blow the primordial waters into what we now call heaven and earth. On the day of creation, the Holy Spirit is at work bringing out the old and bringing in the new. It's the same story when Israel is delivered from Egypt at the Red Sea.

In the latter part of Exodus chapter fourteen, we again get the word that can be translated as spirit as easily as it can be translated as wind. What happens in the latter half of Exodus chapter fourteen is that God uses the wind of the Holy Spirit to blow open the Red Sea so that Israel might pass through to the other side before the waters fall back upon Pharaoh and his army. Here too the Spirit is bringing out the old and bringing in the new. At the Red Sea and through the wind of the Holy Spirit, Israel says goodbye to slavery and hello to freedom. Even if it can't be done on the basis of a supposed reference to new wine, it's pretty easy to translate the Holy Spirit's continuing association with wind on the day of Pentecost into the message that the Holy Spirit a change agent; a wind that blows out the old and blows in the new.

The same message can also be derived from the cross-culture communication the Holy Spirit enables on the day of Pentecost. This ability to communicate beyond one's culture of origin is a reversal of what happened at Babel in Genesis chapter eleven. As Genesis chapter eleven tells it, all the peoples of the earth once spoke the same language. Showing themselves to be sinners in the process, the people sharing this common language used their ability to communicate to conspire against God, just as a snake and the first humans had earlier used their ability to communicate to conspire against God. In an effort to end these kinds of revolts and conspiracies, at Babel, God separates the peoples of the earth into cultures or groups with different languages. Suddenly, the ability to cooperate through a shared language is gone. In the place of conspiracies and revolts, you've now got babel and all the nothingness that babel can produce. But on Pentecost, God realizes this fix to one problem leads to another. Though the absence of a shared language limits the degree to which creation can conspire against God, it also places unhealthy and unhelpful limits on the degree to which people can cooperate for the purpose of furthering God's plan and completing God's work. And so, on the day of Pentecost, through the coming of the Holy Spirit, God eliminates the language barriers that have previously gotten in the way of

cooperative ventures which would have helped to replace a broken status quo with the far superior Kingdom of God. Again, when the Holy Spirit comes, it's out with the old and in with the new. And guess what! Just as the Holy Spirit came when the first disciples were gathered together in one place, so also does the Holy Spirit come today when we're gathered together for worship. What can we expect to change? How will the Holy Spirit pressure and equip us to bring in the new and carry out the old?

The answer is that we should expect the Spirit to bring in that which includes and bring out that which excludes. Prior to the act of creation in which the Spirit was a full and active participant, we weren't a part of the picture at all. But through the act of creation, we were brought in to God's unfolding plan for the future. Prior to the parting of the Red Sea by the Holy Spirit, freedom was the possession of the Egyptians alone. After the parting of the Red Sea, freedom became Israel's as well. Prior to the multilingualism enabled by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, many of those gathered in Jerusalem and the regions of the world they represented had no way to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. But once the Spirit enabled this language barrier to be crossed, these same people and their respective cultures and regions were brought into Jesus' fold; increasing the number of waves bringing the far superior Kingdom of God to the shore of our day-to-day lives. It's how it always goes with the Spirit. Down go the walls of exclusion and up go the houses, the churches, the communities, the countries, the planets that have a good and healthy place for all. When the Spirit gets a hold of us, it's always out with the hoarding and in with the sharing. And this isn't an effort that stops at the doors of the church. It's an effort the Spirit equips and empowers us to carry out into the world God loves.

Think about it! Whether it's here at church or somewhere outside of this church's doors, I suspect the order of the day is pretty similar and that's in one way or another rebuilding. How do rebuild our church now that the worst of the pandemic is hopefully gone? How do we rebuild our economy now that it can be reopened at a more aggressive pace? How do we rebuild our medical system now that the pandemic has revealed some of its gaping holes in terms of both access and preparation? How do we rebuild our nation after the storming of the capitol and after two consecutive presidential elections in which one party or the other has cried foul? How do we rebuild our world so that we're better equipped to work on shared problems than we were during the pandemic? Unless I'm totally mistaken, the order of the day all over the place these days is rebuilding. It's a time of great opportunity; a time to move the ball forward for all on a whole lot of different fronts. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, may we be led to rebuild in ways that increase access and inclusion; that increase harmony and unity; that increase sharing and sacrifice for the sake of the common good. It will be then that the Kingdom of God will have come quite a few waves closer to replacing the broken systems of the status quo with the love, the life, and the joy that God desires for all of us. Amen!