

Questions Jesus Asked (2)

By

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Scripture: Luke 5:33-39

Can You Make Wedding Guests Fast While the Bridegroom Is With them?

I've been thinking lately about the questions Jesus asked. **My friend Jim just finished preaching a sermon series on that very topic and is thinking of writing a book about the questions Jesus asked.** I didn't read his sermons, because I knew I wanted to consider those questions myself and didn't want my heresy to be confused by his orthodoxy. **But he sent me his sermons to read, then phoned to ask if I thought they'd make a good book.** Of course, I felt guilty because I hadn't read the sermons, but I said, "You bet," then changed the subject. **I don't mind Jesus' questions, but Jim's questions can put me on the spot.**

Last week, we considered Jesus' question to the man who'd been ill 38 years. "Do you want to be healed?" **It reminded us that not everyone who is ill or incomplete wants to be well and whole, so it pays to ask.**

This week the Pharisees noticed the followers of John seemed more pious than the followers of Jesus. **The Pharisees were like the Puritans, of whom H.L. Mencken once said, "were desperately afraid that, somewhere, someone might be having a good time."**

So here are the Pharisees, stewing, and they ask Jesus why his followers aren't taking this business of religion more seriously. **Rather than answering their question, he responds with one of his own.** "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"

Note that Jesus isn't condemning the religious ritual of fasting. As far as I can tell, Jesus had a great appreciation for rites and rituals. **He participated in the synagogue, he celebrated the sacred days of his Jewish faith, he seemed to value the more positive aspects of religious life.** But with Jesus, religion was to be lived through the lens of *appropriateness*.

Fasting has its place, but not at weddings, not when the bridegroom is with you. **That's the time to eat and enjoy.** It's a question of appropriateness.

Honoring the Sabbath is important, but don't let it keep you from healing the sick or feeding the hungry. **God is honored by our service as much as God is honored by our worship.** It's a question of appropriateness.

Teaching your prodigal children to be responsible for their poor choices is important. **But my son was dead, and now is alive; was lost, but now is found.** So bring the fatted calf and let's have a party. We'll discuss the lesson later. It's a question of appropriateness.

Here's the problem: **We have this fabric of old forms and rituals, and we're trying to take the cloth of new life and stitch them together, but we come apart at the seams.** We have this old wineskin and we try to fill it with new wine, but it swells and bursts because there's no give in the old wineskin. **It's rigid and unyielding, has lost its elasticity and flexibility and can't hold new life.** Spencer came to me this week and said he needed new shoes. We'd just bought him new shoes, so I told him he didn't need new shoes that his old shoes fit fine. **But then I reached down and felt his toes and he was out of room.** There's no way he can keep cramming new and growing life into those old forms. I suggested we cut off the ends of his shoes, open things up a bit, but Joan wouldn't go along.

This is like our situation here. There's new life here at Fairfield that we've been trying to shoehorn it into this 1892 shoe. **We talked about knocking down a wall, cutting off the end of the shoe, but it's not enough.** As Quakers we believe in simplicity and using our resources to help the poor, so we have these two competing desires, both of which are important—more space for more life and loving care for God's children. **So it becomes a question of appropriateness.** What is appropriate at this time? Not *What is going to be our church's emphasis forever and ever?* But *What is appropriate at this time?*

I remember when our kids were born. We had a friend who said, "I've lost many a friend to kids." He was kind of joking, but kind of not joking. I asked him what he meant. **He said, "You'll have kids. Your priorities will change. I won't see you as much."** I assured him we would always be friends and would see each other just as often. But he was right. **He knew my old life would be changed by new life, that you can't put new life into old forms and expect everything to hold together and stay the same.**

So these Pharisees wanted to do religion the same old way, with the same unbending rituals, the same rigid ceremonies and sacraments, the same unyielding schedule, the same immovable priorities, and Jesus said, "You can't expect people to fast when the bridegroom is with them. We've got a new situation here. It requires a new response."

When I started writing, I was pastoring full-time, got overwhelmed and physically ill. Went to several doctors, none of whom could help me. **Then it occurred to me that maybe the problem was in my mind, not in my body, so I went to see Laverne, our neighborhood psychotherapist.** I was telling her about all my problems and challenges and how I'd been responding to them, and she said, **"Philip, you have to find a new way to live. The game has changed, but you keep running the same old plays, expecting them to work."**

I was like the Pharisees who thought life could only be lived one way. So I had to find a more appropriate response to my situation.

Sometimes, I wish Scripture had been more specific. God love 'em, these Pharisees are trying so hard to please God, but sometimes it's so hard to hear a new word and rigidity sets in, often for the worthiest of motives—you want to preserve a tradition or defend the faith. **I wish the Scriptures had given us a little guidance about when it was okay to lay aside the old wineskin and pick up the new.** But this question of appropriateness, of what is fitting on a given occasion and what is not, is never answered in a definitive way. **Instead, we're given**

parables and analogies and metaphors and asked to love with all our hearts and think with all our brains.

When Joan's mom moved from her home of 67 years to our town, she said she'd rather die, which was to say she couldn't imagine life in any form but the form she knew. **It turns out the worst part wasn't the change, the worst part was *imagining the change*.** Now she is thriving, clear of mind, and happy. We grow so used to these old wineskins, we think it's the only way to live, all brittle and crackled and uninspired. **But then the bridegroom comes along and says, "Let's dance."** And we have to decide whether we're going to sit on the sidelines or learn to waltz.