

“Cracked Bottles”

Gen 12:1-9; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-17

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Come along with me. If somebody came around and said “come along with me” would you go? It might depend on who’s saying “come along” - what kind of relationship we may have with that person. After all we teach children these days not to go with strangers. So what would it take to go along with someone? Why would we go? It might have something to do with a level of trust, perhaps. Do we trust the person who’s asking us to come along? Or we might have hope that if we come along with them, our life might change, maybe at least we won’t be as bored as we were before or something like that. We may want to see some kind of real change. But what seems to me to be the case is, that at the bottom of it all, the reason we would go along with someone - even if we knew them and trusted them - is that we have some kind of need. We have some reason we want to follow. It could even be as simple as we want a relationship with that person and they want us to come along. However, if we have no need, are we going to change what we do? If we are satisfied with where we are, we don’t have a need to change, why go?

As Jesus was walking along he came to Matthew and as he talked to Matthew he said, “Come along with me.” Matthew must have heard about him and was pretty happy to go along with Jesus. It seemed to be that there was a bunch of other folks that wanted to come along as well. The way Eugene Peters translates it’s almost as if they crashed the party. They want to be along; they see the need; they know that in Jesus there is someone they want to meet, someone they want to be with. And then we have a little contrast - those other folks that come along, those scribes and Pharisees, I think it was, begin to give Jesus a hard time about who he’s keeping company with. They are not trying to come along with Jesus. They are simply judging what he’s doing. They seem to be pretty satisfied with what they know and who they are. They don’t see what’s happening except that it’s different from what they think should be happening. And Jesus notices what’s going on. He sees this group of folks who seem pretty self-satisfied with how they’re doing things and don’t think he should be doing anything different. He says something pretty simple. It comes directly out of Hosea, “God wants mercy, not sacrifice.”

Now Eugene Peterson translates *sacrifice* as religion, I think with some reason. Sacrifice was the form people used, the way that was used to think they were doing the right thing in the right place with God. You might say the way that they had God down pat, taken care of, and a way to define those folks who weren’t doing it the same way as not such good folks.

Jesus is saying God really cares about how you’re relating to each other, not the forms that you’re using, not the sacrifice, not the worship. But are you showing each other mercy? After all, God comes, I come, Jesus says, not to bring healing to those who think they are already healed, but to those who know their need. The way Eugene Peterson translates it - “I come to invite the outsider, not coddle the insider.” Interesting way of translating - it leads me to a number of questions. So often I’ve read this and got to this point and recognized that Jesus is the healer, he’s the one who brings healing and perhaps I need to recognize my own need to get that healing. Then I didn’t quite get why these next verses fit in with that. John’s disciples come and ask Jesus, “Why aren’t these guys being more disciplined, fasting?”

Well, what's that about? We do that kind of thing when we need God to work in our lives. So the contrast is a group of folks saying we're going to try to talk to God to work in our lives and they're missing the fact that God is working right in their midst. If God doesn't do things exactly the way we want God to do them, are we going to miss what God is up to? It seems that's what Jesus is telling these disciples of John and the Pharisees. You're so focused on how you think you should have God work in your lives you're missing the fact that the bonfire is going right now. And all you're doing is throwing water on it. When you have a friendly bonfire, why put it out? When God is at work among us, let's enjoy the glow, warm to it, experience it. We've been invited to come along. Jesus is saying, "If you do not come along then you can't see what's happening." The invitation is there.

He puts it in another way in the next two pieces of that verse - the mismatched. Who would patch old clothes with silk or old denim with new denim, so when you wash it it makes a nice pucker. He's looking at the "mismatchness" or putting wine in old wine skins. The reason they wouldn't do that is because the skins would break; they didn't have the strength anymore. So the question he seems to be asking is are we just letting ourselves become old wine skins? Or another way that Eugene Peterson translates that - since we don't use wineskins so much - is cracked bottles. Are we simply allowing ourselves to be cracked bottles?

What does that mean? What does it look like for us to become cracked bottles? Not to be able to contain what God gives us, not to be able to accept the invitation to go along and to find the healing and to have what God gives us. And what does a full bottle, a bottle that's not cracked, do? It's able to take what God gives, to be filled, and then to pour it out, to share it. So Jesus is suggesting that we can become those who not only hear the invitation and come along, but recognize that that invitation leads us to mercy, to caring for one another, to be those who pour out, dispense, God's grace ourselves. But how do we become cracked bottles? It's when I begin to decide that it's my way or the highway kind of thing; it's when I think I have it all down. You know, sometimes I think that where we see it often is in our own taste in music. Can we worship God with more than one kind of music? Can our music be an invitation to somebody else or is a roadblock? If a piece of music means something to me, how can I share that rather than just say somebody should see in it what I experience. It doesn't matter whether it's an old hymn, a new piece of praise music, a Taizé song. The question is, is it an invitation or a roadblock? Does it become a way we pour out God's grace or simply a cracked bottle that dissipates it and doesn't share it? Jesus is inviting us to come along, to know not only God's mercy, but to share God's mercy. I don't think by ourselves that we can be anything but cracked bottles. But it is as we see our own cracks and the way we need that healing, that it is as we accept the invitation that God heals us through Jesus and we're ever renewed. That's one of the nice things about being Reformed. We've got it in that idea of who we are. We're reformed, ever reforming. It's a recognition that as we begin to get too sure of ourselves then we begin to get stuck if we don't let Jesus move us again, if we don't hear the invitation again to follow along, to see what's he's doing, to allow him to heal our cracks, and let us be the vessels who bring the wonder of God's love and grace to each other. That's our invitation, as individuals, as the body, not to be cracked bottles, but to be those bottles that are being healed, that we can receive what God brings, that grace that Jesus gives us and share it, not just creating a place for insiders, but a place to everyone.

Let's not be cracked bottles. Let's be followers of Christ. Amen.