



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Duct Tape Religion

Matthew 9:14-17

Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”

Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. ¹⁷ Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

I remember years ago when a group from our church traveled to the mosquito infested city of Port Arthur to work on homes that were heavily damaged by Hurricane Ike. We were housed in these little blue corrugated cardboard boxes they called pods. The pods had little windows cut out of them with netting that would not stay in place while millions of mosquitoes eagerly eyed us from their roosts. If something was not done about the screens, there is a good chance that every drop of blood in our systems would be drained before morning. We were saved, and survived the entire week due to an invention from the 1920’s. Yes, Duct Tape came to our rescue.

Did you know that it was originally called Duck Tape after the bird that swims in our ponds, for the tape is water proof? In 1942 the U.S. military used Duck Tape to keep moisture out of ammunition boxes, and of course it came in one color – army green.

This miracle tape was used in World War Two to fix weapons, jeeps, and aircraft. After the war the tape found use in the booming housing industry to connect heating and air conditioning duct work, and the name was changed to Duct Tape – that is, duct with a “T,” and its color was changed to silver to match the ductwork. Now it comes in a variety of colors.

I have found that Duct Tape is essential to keep around. It is as essential as a flashlight to keep in that little pack you carry in your car with emergency supplies. For almost two years black duct tape held in place one of the side mirrors on a van we used to own. Recently, I saw a car with a duct taped rear side window. And what do you do after you have installed the satellite dish on the top of your house and the thing is still a little wobbly? Well, you yell down to your wife, “Honey, can you get me the duct tape?”

This past Thursday, I typed in the words “Uses for Duct Tape” in my search engine and there were hundreds of ideas of how Duct Tape is used. I saw a wallet made out of Duct Tape.

Do you know how to keep climbing animals out of your tree? Wrap about two feet of the tree’s trunk with duct tape with the sticky side out. Animals hate that sticky feel on their feet.

A hiker fell and ended up with a fifteen inch, deep cut to his neck and shoulder. He was losing a lot of blood, and his life would be over an hour before they could get him to the emergency room. His fellow hikers pulled out the duct tape to tape the wound shut, and sure enough the doctor in the emergency room said that if it were not for the duct tape the injured hiker would have bled to death.

I read about a farmer who had a calf that could not stand up to nurse. Of course, duct tape came to the rescue. With PVC pipe and duct tape he made supports for the calf’s legs which enabled the little fellow to stand.

One handyman said, “You only need two things in life. First is WD-40 to make it go, and second, duct tape to make it stop.”

The problem with duct tape is that it provides a temporary fix. Eventually it will wear off. We have an air mattress with a hole in it. And, of course, we fixed it with duct tape. But eventually the tape wore off and it made the hole worse.

I think if Jesus had duct tape during his day he would have used it in his parable, but instead he talked about patches and wineskins. So rather than saying, “No one puts duct tape on an old garment, He said, “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If you do this you are asking for trouble, for eventually it will tear away. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. You put new wine in old brittle wine skins, and if the wine does a little more fermenting, the old skin that has no more elasticity will break, and the wine will spill out and the skin will be ruined.”

In the text immediately before today's text, Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. And the Pharisees had a problem with the company Jesus was keeping.

In today's text it was the disciples' of John the Baptist who were having a problem with Jesus. They were wondering why Jesus' disciples didn't fast. The Pharisees just worried themselves sick over the company Jesus ate with, and the disciples of John the Baptist were wondering why Jesus was eating in the first place?

That Pharisees were the conservatives and maybe John's disciples were the liberals, and I think both groups were fundamentalist.

The Pharisees said nothing needed to change. We have the law, what else do we need? We are working with Congress to make sure there is no tolerance for Sabbath breakers or for folks who hang out with the wrong people. They are legalists. They form their lobbies to influence the laws of the land, making sure people live in ways they approved.

Then there were the liberals, with the same intensity working to bring in the kingdom of God on their terms. The liberals said, "Things have to change. We cannot keep going on the way we are going."

And Jesus found himself in the middle of two extremes. There was the religious fundamentalism that would never work. It was like putting a new patch on an old garment, or putting new wine in an old wineskin, or duct tape on an air mattress. Legalism, authoritarianism, systems of who was clean and who was unclean, strict religious practices such as fasting, exclusivity, it's my way or the highway religion, simply cannot proclaim to people the love of God, nor can it be the basis of a relationship with the Almighty.

What did the prophet Micah say? **"What does God require, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."** But rather than listening to Micah, human beings have a propensity to seek a religious expression that promotes our personal understanding of justice, rather than Biblical justice; it is a religion that is not an expression of kindness.

There is a remarkable trend toward fundamentalism in all religions – including various Christian denominations. Forms of fundamentalism also live in Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. Increasingly, so-called true believers are inclined get caught in the idea that says: "Since I am aligned with God, I am superior and my beliefs should prevail, and anyone who disagrees with me is inherently wrong."

It is not a long step to carry this on to believe that those who do not believe the way I do are inherently inferior.

The ultimate step is make one with whom we disagree subhuman, and then their lives become insignificant. And in order to make our point, let's invent a bomb that cannot be detected, hide it under our shirt, and kill hundreds of innocent people – men, women and children shopping in an open market.

We can also do it, maybe not kill innocent people, but I have to admit my propensity to demonize people who do not live up to my standards of what is right and wrong.

Over the past eight to ten years, in the Presbyterian Church and in other churches, there is the temptation to huddle around with like-minded people who enjoy the safety and security that comes from not having to deal with new ideas, or new movements of the Spirit, or a deeper understanding of what God is revealing to us through the Scriptures.

We protect our treasured beliefs and refuse to face the religious challenges that the day brings. We understand that everything that we need to know has already been said. There is no reason to think about our faith, or about how God continues to act in the world. We already have it figured out, so the easiest thing to do is to find a church where everybody believes the same way.

Living in a diverse environment is hard. It will make us think. It is challenging. Yet for a sinful person like myself, I believe diversity is one of God's tools, used to refine us. It is the fire that helps get rid of the dross, and in fact brings us closer to what God intends. For the truth of the matter is, a faith that is not challenged is a faith that is not growing.

It is the tendency when it comes to faith that I know it all, and then segregate myself with a homogenous, like-minded group that gives rise to fundamentalism, and it has led to intense religious conflict. But a church that resists the inclination toward fundamentalism and desires to follow the nature, actions, and words of Jesus Christ should encompass a diverse group of folks and together exhibit to the world a true sense of generosity, forgiveness, compassion, and unselfish love. For these are the wineskins that will hold the gospel.

It is not easy to do. It is a natural human inclination to encapsulate ourselves in a superior fashion with people who are just like us – and to assume that we are fulfilling the mandate of our lives if we just confine our love to our own family or to people who are similar and compatible. Breaking through this barrier and

reaching out to others is what personifies a Christian and what emulates the perfect example that Christ set for us, as he sat down to eat with tax collectors and sinners.

Now I want to be clear. There are fundamentals of the Christian faith which must be expressed. There are beliefs that are absolutely fundamental to our Reformed understanding of faith. Some would call them the essential tenets of our faith. For example, it is an absolute that God has made himself known as the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit.) That, through the miracle of the incarnation, God put on human flesh, so when I encounter the person of Jesus Christ I am encountering God. The Scriptures are the authority for the church. Our justification is by grace alone through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ on the Cross and lived out by faith, and God is absolutely sovereign over his creation. To love God is the greatest commandment, and to love others is the second greatest commandment. Please do not let the word “fundamental” become a bad word.

But today, I encounter people in the church and the political arena who are called fundamentalist. Like the Pharisees who were in constant conflict with Jesus, they never could understand the spirit of the law, because they were so busy forcing the letter of the law down people’s throats. “You cannot heal on the Sabbath. You cannot associate with dirty people, with tax collectors and other sinners. We can’t have this kind of thing happening in Israel. It is up to us to keep the faith pure. Why aren’t you fasting?”

I hate to mention former Presidents in my sermons, because there is the distinct possibility that half of you will say, “Amen,” and the other half will shake their heads in shame that their preacher even mentioned that name in a positive light.

Maybe the best thing to say is that one of our former Presidents hit the nail on the head in his description of a fundamentalist. And the phrase “hit the nail on the head” is a hint as to which President I am quoting.

This nameless President who often, and quite literally hits the nail on the head, wrote, “Fundamentalist movements, whether Christian or Jewish or Islamic, are led by authoritarian personalities who consider themselves to be superior to others, and, within religious groups, have an overwhelming commitment to dominate their fellow believers.

Fundamentalists draw clear distinctions between themselves as true believers and others. They are convinced that they are right and that anyone who contradicts them is ignorant and possibly evil.

Fundamentalists are militant in fighting against any challenge to their beliefs. They are often angry and sometimes resort to verbal or even physical abuse against those who interfere with the implementation of their social agenda.

Fundamentalists tend to make their self-definition increasingly narrow and restricted, to isolate themselves, to demagogue emotional issues, and to view change, cooperation, negotiation, and other efforts to resolve differences as signs of weakness.

To summarize, there are three words that characterize this brand of fundamentalism: rigidity, domination, and exclusion.

I see this type of fundamentalism in both conservative and liberal camps. I see it in organizations such as the Christian Coalition, and I see it in the political left of Hollywood. And I think Jesus is saying to us in these short parables, “The grace, mercy, wonder, compassion, love, and beauty of the gospel cannot be held or expressed in any form of fundamentalism.” It is like duct tape. It may temporarily fix a hole, but it will eventually wear off, leaving you with a flat mattress. It is like putting new wine into old wineskins.

Is there any wonder why there seems to be such an anti-Christian movement in our nation today? So many people who need to know Jesus Christ are presented with a gospel which is clothed with rigidity, domination, and exclusion.

Christian fundamentalist groups spend millions, maybe billions on the political process. They are engaging the state more and more, looking past the time honored national value of the separation of church and state. They are working to legislate morality, when the only way to make a person moral is to change their hearts, which of course is the work of the Holy Spirit and not that of the state.

Of course the church should speak about morality. But I am absolutely confident that if Christians spent one third as much money and energy on effective means of evangelism rather than making people angry in their lobbying efforts, we would be ten times more successful. It’s the heart of this nation that needs to be changed, and what better way to change the heart of a nation than to show the love, mercy and compassion of Jesus Christ. But in our all too human logic, there are those who believe we need to force people to live by our standard of morality.

Can’t we figure it out that the more we force others to live by the Ten Commandments there will be fewer people who will do it? But the more we share

the love of Jesus Christ, the more folks will be compelled to live by godly standards. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Rather than a fundamentalism which is characterized by rigidity, domination, and exclusion, how about a faith that is open to reformation by God's word and spirit, one that says that we do not have all the answers, one that places self-sacrifice and service over domination, and one that leaves room for diversity and inclusion and allows Almighty God and not us to serve as judge.

Last Sunday was Mother's Day. Our youth led the service and I say they did an outstanding job. However, I did not get to talk about mothers, and I may be forcing the issue, but just maybe the idea of a mother's love is just the illustration of the new wineskin that Jesus spoke of. Of course, I know this is not a perfect illustration, because there are some pretty bad mothers in this fallen world. But in general, is there any greater love than that of a mother for her child? Of course, love is the wineskin that holds the Gospel.

My earliest memory of my mother is sitting in her lap while she sang me a song. I'm not sure how old I was: I guess I was two or three. We must have been playing the "do it again" game for I remember asking her to sing the song again, and whatever she was singing she did it again as I snuggled up to her and listened to her comforting voice.

As the years passed, she watched over me. I remember her collecting tin apple juice cans. She carefully filed off the jagged edges on the lids, took off the labels, washed them and gave them to me to build towers and forts. I did that in the kitchen in the afternoon while she cooked a meal for her husband and four boys.

She was very protective, and eventually she had five sons. She had to be protective if all five of us were to survive. She told me not to ever go near the abandoned construction site close to our home. Well, that was where my friends wanted to go, and I vividly remember looking down the alley which led to this great place of exploration and there was my mother with hands on her hips. She called me and I responded and had my back end paddled all the way home. And though you could not convince me at the time, I am confident now that my disobedience and her loving discipline hurt her much more than it hurt me.

She was there outside the basement door which I had locked to get away from the world when the fire trucks pulled up to my friend's house, where thirty minutes before we were playing with matches. The house was not actually on fire,

but I was so afraid and ashamed that I planned to spend the rest of my days locked in the basement with the washing machine to keep me company. She felt my pain, my fright, my horror to the point that I am sure she too was in tears.

Isaiah wrote, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?” Isaiah found this difficult to believe, but though it is rare, it is possible to find a woman who has no compassion on her child. The most dedicated human relationship that of a mother for her child can be flawed. So Isaiah continued, “Even these may forget.”

Then calling us back to the imagery of a loving mother and her child, Isaiah wrote the words of God, “I will not forget you, behold I have inscribed you on the palm of my hands.”

As my father described my mother using a family illustration, “She gave her love, her beauty, her life, all she had for her children.” Is there any stronger picture of God’s love? That is the new wineskin that holds the Gospel and wins people for Jesus Christ. It is not rigid fundamentalism, but the willingness to give our love, our beauty, our youth, our aged years, our health, our lives, for others. Amen.