The Reverend David Powers
Sunday, November 22, 2026

As we prepare now to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy in your pews, let's take a couple deep breaths together.

Okay, let's take a deep breath in. Breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in. And breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies. Breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That by your power, you would quiet any voice within us but your own. That we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

All right, friends. We are in the midst of this time of in between the end of a sermon series, and moving into Advent, we'll have a new series. And so we've studied a couple different gospel passages here. And this morning we are going to read together from Matthew chapter 9: verses 14-17. A bit of background here. We're going to see reference in verse 14 to disciples of John. It's probably helpful for us to remember that in the time of Jesus teachers gathered followers, those who were magnetic in the ways that they were teaching, and their messages were transformational. People gathered and followed them. It was very normal for a teacher to gain a small following. John, that we know to be John the Baptist or John the Baptizer, is no different than that. He was a very influential teacher in the time, also related to Jesus. Y'all remember in the story that we'll read in the new year, the baptism of our Lord. Y'all remember that John was so popular that there were people coming out into the wilderness to learn from him, to be baptized by him. And those folks continued to follow as disciples of John even as Jesus began his ministry. What we have this morning is a group of those disciples coming to Jesus and asking a question.

Matthew, chapter 9, beginning in the 14th verse.

Then the disciples of John came to Jesus saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The wedding attendants cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wine skins. Otherwise, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are ruined. But new wine is put into fresh wine skins. And so both are preserved."

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Before a million megapixels could fit into a smartphone camera, before two trillion pictures were taken in a calendar year like they were in 2025, there was George Eastman. In April of 1880, George Eastman leased the third floor of a building on State Street in Rochester, New York, and began manufacturing dry plates. 12 years later, Eastman Kodak Company of New York was organized. George's company had a part in almost every technological advance in photography for a century. They created the handheld camera. They popularized roll film. Some in our midst, maybe even new deacons, have never touched roll film before, right? But many of you have. In 1967, the Eastman Kodak Company sold 90% of photographic film in the United States along with 85% of cameras. In 2012, they filed for bankruptcy. From the outside, it would be easy to conclude that somewhere between the mid 1970s and 2012, Kodak lost its edge. But the reality is that its workers had the creativity to compete in a rapidly evolving market. In fact, in 1975, an Eastman Kodak engineer developed the world's first digital camera, but the product was dropped for fear it would threaten Kodak's photographic film business. Kodak had the technology to compete in, even lead a new revolution in photography. They had a vision of what the future might look like, but they lacked the collective will to make the changes that were necessary. Kodak film, those roles that they sold so many of, that was the main driver behind the company's unwillingness to change. Kodak film is an example of something that was incredibly useful in one generation but ceased to be useful and helpful in the next. In fact, it became the hindrance to something new being born.

What is true in Eastman Kodak's business is also true of spiritual lives as well. That's what we get to have a glimpse of this morning from the Gospel according to Matthew. John's disciples asked Jesus a question about religious practice, specifically fasting. Why do your disciples not have to fast, but we're John's disciples? We fast often, and so do the Pharisees, the religious leaders. Why don't your disciples fast? Jesus answers with some quickfire, an illustration about a bridegroom that is certainly more well understood in the time in which it is spoken. Then one about a piece of unshrunk cloth, an old cloak, and then wine skins.

The critical point here that Jesus is trying to make isn't that fasting is bad. It's…it's simply that it isn't helpful and healing in the same way that it once was. The point of fasting, so that we're clear, the point of fasting was to draw oneself closer to one's God. To draw oneself closer to one's God. That is why we fasted. That is why the disciples of John fasted. And Jesus says to them, "I am he. I am the one that you are attempting to draw closer to in your fasting, and I'm right here with you. There'll be a time when I'm no longer here, when the bridegroom will depart. And in that time, you can fast again. But right now, you need to recognize what is right in front of you. This religious practice with the end of drawing you closer to God is not useful, but your attentiveness to me is." Jesus is a brand new revelation of who God is and how we are to follow God. So he is not convicting old practices, but he seems to be unconcerned with maintaining

the status quo of them. Jesus wants even John's disciples to experience the brand new life that he has come to offer. He wants them to know forgiveness. He wants them to know newness of spirit and soul. He is interested in his followers having their lives transformed. And Jesus knew a simple truth that these disciples of John, they could not experience new life if nothing changed. They could not experience the newness that he was trying to bring into their life, resurrection, if everything stayed the same. It's why he uses this wine skin analogy. You can't put new wine into an old wine skin. Well, why is that? Well, new wine has a liveness to it. It's a moving and developing thing. It needs a wine skin that can kind of move and flex. It needs something that can hold it, that has elasticity to it. If you try to put new wine into the hardened old wine skin, as Jesus clearly points out, it's just not going to work. What the new wine needs is flexibility. What the new wine needs is a container that is willing to move as it changes.

That's the truth that we have to wrestle with this morning as well because Jesus was not simply interested in transforming the lives of John's disciples or his disciples. He is interested in the transformation of our lives as well.

He is interested in transforming relationships in our work, our friendships, our partnerships, our faith. He's interested in that. And what he knows is that we cannot experience the newness of life that he has to offer if nothing changes. We can't be new creations if everything stays the same. So this passage a couple thousand years after Jesus first spoke it aloud is an invitation for us this morning to not convict the practices, the behaviors, the rituals that we have practiced as bad but simply to evaluate our lives and imagine what is it that served a purpose for us in one season that is no longer helpful anymore. There could be something that was incredibly helpful and healing in one stage of your life that simply isn't helpful and healing anymore.

Let me give you some examples. I've told this before, but my professor of pastoral care, the one who taught us about marriage and family theory, he was married five times, right? To the same woman. That's what he told us. Married five times to the same woman. Why? Because the way that he related to that woman in the first five years of their marriage together had to change and shift. The way that she related to him, it had to change and shift, right? The way he described his 40 years of marriage was the consistent evaluation of what is still serving the marriage in this case now. ‘We don't pause,” he said, "We don't pause the second we make those commitments to each other. We are continually evolving, changing, and growing. We are updating our software for the new season.” What is true in marriage is also true in parenting. I was talking to a friend of mine this morning. She was remembering the first couple months of motherhood. She had welcomed along with her husband a little girl into the world, and that little girl didn't sleep too well, which meant that my friend didn't sleep too well. She says that she had this thing in her head. She had had, before her daughter was born, a morning routine. It began with waking up not to an alarm but simply by the sun. And then there was a time of about 30 minutes that she got to dedicate to morning devotion and sipping her coffee slowly. The way she described it as she was caring for that baby early in the morning, her only hope and wish, she

said, "Everything will be just fine whenever I can get back to my morning routine. When I can get back to waking up slowly and drinking coffee and devoting early morning time to God.” She said, "My daughter was 18 months old when I realized I was never going back to that time." She said, "I'm a little slow on the uptake sometimes. It took me a while, but what I had to realize was that what had prepared me for my day for a season of my life was no longer realistic or helpful in the new season that I was in.

What’s true in marriage and parenting can also be true in our faith journeys as well. I remember having a conversation with a friend and a confidant in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, as I was doing an internship there. They talked about how they were really captivated by this TV preacher named Joel Ostein. They talked about how they would stay up late on Saturdays and watch a replay of the previous week's sermon. Some of y'all may have listened to Joel preach, or you probably at least know who he is, right? This was a good Presbyterian person who was telling me that they loved and resonated with Joel's preaching. It was interesting because I had too. I had stayed up during my seminary career. Anytime that it was late Saturday night, I'd watch him as well. So, I listened without judgment to this person. We talked about a recent message, and this person talked about how much it had resonated with them and they felt like they were growing. A couple of years later, we reconnected. I asked them if they were still watching Joel. They said, "I don't anymore. I feel like I kind of matured past those sorts of messages." Again, no judgment. In fact, there's a researcher named Fowler who talks about stages of faith development. We all move through seasons. What was useful in one season to that person was no longer useful in the next season of their faith life, their faith journey. This is something that my counselor is always inviting me to reflect upon. Something that served me well in one season, how is it serving me now? Her favorite question to ask is, "How is that working for you now?”

I talk about a relationship, a friendship, or even work. What I've realized in my personal life is that I bring with me different ways of functioning that have served me well. Right? They served me well in my adolescence or in my young adulthood, but they don't serve me in midlife anymore. not in the same way that they did. I think that's a bit of what Jesus is trying to invite the disciples of John into and, I believe, each of us into this morning. It's a deeper reflection on something that maybe served us once but doesn't actually serve us now. The question that he seems to be asking of us is what is no longer helpful? What is no longer helpful for you in this season of life? The one that you find yourself in right now. This season of relationship, this season of marriage, the season of parenting, the season of faith, the season of work.

What is it that made you excel in a previous season of life, but it's just not helpful in the same way again. I think he's asking us that question because as Jesus was interested in the transformation of the lives of John's disciples so many years ago, he is interested in the transformation of your life now.

There is a newness, a refreshing, that he wants to author in your life that I want to posit to you this morning only has room if you're willing to evaluate what is no longer serving you in this season. Jesus can do anything, just so you know. He can make all sorts of room in your heart and in your life. But I'd posit if you are able to do some reflection, the spirit will reveal to you what it is that's no longer serving you. It's not that, like Eastman Kodak, we don't have the insights into what is no longer serving us. It's not like we can't see a future sometimes because we can. The question for us this morning is, do we have the collective will to create space for the new thing that God is doing? I am uncertain. I am unclear about what in your life is in need of transformation. But I know that whether it be relationship or vocation or friendship, whatever it is, we worship a God who has come to make all things new. So maybe we can receive this question about fasting as an invitation. Maybe we can choose to set aside some old wine skins that are too rigid now, calcified even. Maybe we can hear the invitation to create a new container, one that's more flexible than rigid, one that's more breathable, one that can allow for the new thing that God is doing to be nurtured in this time, to grow. I want to tell you this morning that God is trying to pour new life and hope into you and that our willingness to be shaped by those new possibilities and purpose–I think that's what Jesus is trying to get at. So the question of the sermon title and the question for you today, what is not helpful anymore? What way of being in relationship or in work? What part of your faith journey is just not helpful anymore? Are you willing to set that aside so that you might draw even closer to Christ? So that Christ might draw even closer to you? Are you willing to risk the new life that comes when we recognize Jesus in our midst?

I'm going to pray for some wisdom and insight for each of us this morning and then some courage, because it's one thing to name the thing that's not working anymore. It's another thing to have the courage to do something about it. So, let's pray together.

Gracious and loving God, we trust and we believe that Christ has come to bring about new life. What we pray for, Lord, is wisdom and insight into the spaces that need refreshing, updating in our lives. Whether they be relationships, whether they be our faith journey, whether they be in our work, you know them. And what we need you to reveal to us is what is no longer helpful anymore. We want to be people who are open to the new thing you were doing. So help us to set aside those old wine skins. Help us to take up new fresh ones that can receive the new life that you're pouring into us. Give us the wisdom to discern these things this day. Give us the courage to follow where you are leading us. We ask it in the name of the pioneer and perfector of our faith, Jesus the Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.