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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Mark 2: 18-28
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New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Challenge of Starting Anew

In Gunter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum*, a picaresque adventure about a young boy coming of age in Germany during World War II, there's a strange and moving scene that I can't stop thinking about. The war has ended, and people are rebuilding their cities and their lives after years of devastation. And they've got all kinds of pent up emotions that they can't quite access. So the owner of an exclusive music venue called The Onion Club devises a strange and cathartic ritual. There is neither a bar nor a menu at the club, but people still line up to get in. When patrons enter each night, the owner passes out cutting boards in the shape of pigs or fish, along with a paring knife. Then he would hand each person a garden variety onion. After giving a signal, everyone in the club begins to peel their onions at the same time. The onions would make the eyes of each patron water, all together. Here's how Gunter Grass describes the scene:

...It is not true that when the heart is full the eyes necessarily overflow, some people can never manage it, especially in our century, which in spite of all the suffering and sorrow will surely be known to posterity as the tearless century. It was this drought, this tearlessness that brought those who could afford it to Schmuh's Onion Cellar...and induced them to cut their onions smaller and smaller until the juice - what did the onion juice do? It did what the world and the sorrows of the world could not do: it brought forth a round, human tear. It made them cry. At last they were able to cry again. To cry properly, without restraint, to cry like mad. The tears flowed and washed everything away.¹

I love that scene. For all its strangeness, it conveys a rarely spoken truth about human existence, which is that after difficult or overwhelming events, we often don't have ways to access the depth of feeling inside of us. Still less do we have language to capture those depths. Often, we tend to go about our days as if little had changed, even as we struggle to integrate all that has happened into this new and updated version of who we are. Those ordinary Germans returned to life as they knew it, only to find that the life they knew didn't know them in return. They were different. And they needed a mechanism to unite their old and their new selves. Which is where ceremonies and rituals, art, music, and religion all have a role to play. Gunter Grass's novel was itself peeling the onion, cutting it smaller and smaller so that a hurting public could begin to feel again, and thereafter, to begin the arduous work of healing – integrating all those experiences into the tapestry of their lives.

It's a scene that came back to me on a recent Friday evening. Prior to the pandemic, every Friday afternoon, our family piled in the car and drove to New Haven for weekly music lessons. We hadn't done it for a year and a half, but then a few weeks ago, it all started up again. It felt good to be there. It felt nice to be back in a familiar place, and going through a familiar routine. I greeted the receptionist at the door, and each of the kids' teachers. It was nice to see them all.

¹ Grass, Gunter, *The Tin Drum* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), pg. 525. Published in German in 1959.

But to a person, when I asked how they were, they just shook their heads and said, “This is weird.” I knew exactly what they meant. The place was more or less the same. The routine and the schedule for all of us was more or less the same. But we weren’t. There was a disjunct between the lives we were resuming and the people we had become in the intervening year and a half. As I sat in the hallway of the music school trying to understand what it was we were experiencing, I grew more and more restless, agitated even. It all felt not wholly unlike the scene from Gunter Grass’s novel. It wasn’t the unleashing of tears, per se, but rather the return to a normal that was anything but normal, and an inability to articulate, or even to fully name what was going on inside of us. I had my computer with me, in order to keep on working on that week’s sermon. Instead, I opened a separate file, and began to type out notes for what I’m offering you today. I do so because I think we’re all feeling traces and tremors of what those of us at the Neighborhood Music School felt that night.

The first place my mind turned was to a famous essay by Freud, “The Uncanny,” published in 1919, just after the end of the first World War. The uncanny is a translation of a German word, “unheimlich,” which literally means unhoused. So the experience of the uncanny, first and foremost, is an experience of being temporarily removed or separated, unhoused, from one’s self. For Freud, that’s an experience that occurs whenever an aspect of the past that hasn’t been fully integrated surfaces in the present, interrupting one’s ordinary, waking life. Often, he theorized, that happens with aspects of our childhood that we’ve given up in order to become functional adults. That’s why dolls, or clowns, or children’s toys, often function as symbols of the uncanny in films and literature. Those horror films about Chucky, the murderous doll? That’s a depiction of Freud’s uncanny. Or Stephen King’s novel *It*, about the malevolent clown? That too is a depiction of the uncanny. But it’s not only about childhood experiences that haven’t been integrated. It’s about any major life event that overwhelms our ability to incorporate it into our lived existence. It was about soldiers returning from the war, and being asked to return to the lives they had known previously, while being fundamentally altered as a result of their experiences. The uncanny became a shorthand way to name the gap, the abyss, really, that stood between those overwhelming experiences and the reality those soldiers returned to. It was a way of describing what feels like a kind of haunting: the unbidden presence of past experiences that keep turning up, making the present feel, in the words of the teachers and staff of the music school, “weird.” To return to the Onion Club, the uncanny, that sense of a hollow, haunted present, is precisely what the patrons were experiencing. And it’s precisely what they went there to overcome.

It turns out that Jesus described that disjunct between past and present selves, and the inability to integrate deep and sometimes overwhelming life experiences long before Freud. (Let me say parenthetically that while Freud had a deep aversion to religion for his entire life, and little to no interest in Jesus, there are strong affinities between Jesus and psychoanalysis). That’s the second thing I began to note in the hallway: the way Jesus continually tried to outfit his listeners and his followers with ways to live with, and integrate, hidden, hurting, or repressed features of themselves into a new reality. He did it widely, on a societal scale, of course – that’s what was happening when he incorporated the blind and the lame, the lepers and the crooks into his ministry. But he was doing it on an individual scale as well. When he tells the parable about the new cloth and the old cloak, and the new wine and old wineskins, he was getting at precisely the feature of existence that Freud was diagnosing in his essay on the uncanny. What he seems to be

saying to his listeners is this: you change. We change. Sometimes those changes are gradual, and quite subtle, like when we leave childhood behind as we enter adolescence and adulthood. But sometimes those changes are sudden, like in an overwhelming life event. We become different somehow, cut from new cloth, distilled from new fruit. But it can be hard, painfully hard, to superimpose those changes onto a previous way of life. That new life experience? It can tear right off the old cloak, leaving a gaping hole in the garment of your life. That new wine? It can burst the seams of one's old life, making a mess of things. That's an ancient way of describing the uncanny. What's required, Jesus implies, is a form of existence that can incorporate that new reality without straining the seams, or tearing the garment. The question, of course, is how that new wineskin, or new garment, comes into existence.

I was still deep in thought there in the music school hallway. People passed before my eyes, but I was elsewhere. My kids came in and out of their lessons and I scarcely noticed. I thought about all the ordinary ways Jesus's words name realities that we've each of us known. And I thought of the ways that, even in those ordinary moments, we somehow manage to make new garments and new wineskins in which to place our new selves. I'll offer three examples. First, friendships. A month or so back, an old friend from our years in New Haven paid us a visit. We hadn't seen each other for more than five years and a lot had happened during that time. He was different. We were different. We were new wine. We did what old friends often do when they see each other after a long time apart – we rehashed the stories of the past, trying to capture something of the way things had been. Except that a gap, a chasm, had opened between us – not an unbridgeable one, but a gap all the same. What we needed were new wineskins – a way of being with one another in the present that incorporated the changed people we now were. I think we managed it. The fact of our being together, of sharing what had happened in our lives, of bringing each other up to date, was itself the stitching of new wineskins that we could live into. It doesn't always happen. Some friendships end. The new wine bursts the old wineskins. But some live on, and when they do, it's a sign of grace.

Here's my second example: the ordinary experience of grief that people go through when a spouse, or a parent, or a close friend dies. Many of you have had such experiences – some of you quite recently. Such events alter us in the very core of our being, and yet, stunningly, maddeningly, for everyone else, the world just goes on. How do you reenter daily life after undergoing something so profound? How do you go to lunch, to the store, or celebrate holidays in the aftermath of such an event? A disjunct, a gap, a chasm insinuates itself between the new wine that you are, and the old wineskin that is your previous existence. How do you bridge the chasm? How do you get across it? Well, most experienced counselors and therapists will say that you don't make any sudden decisions for a while. You get across the chasm slowly, gently, tenderly, step by precarious step, so that eventually, the new wine that you've become, and the old wineskin of your previous existence can at last adapt to one another. There too, a kind of grace takes effect, allowing us to move into a new life with the confidence and assurance that the seams will not break, but hold fast.

Take now a third example, my last: religious conversions. What is a religious conversion other than a strong, mysterious, and overwhelming life event that we struggle to incorporate into our lived daily existence? Some of us are able to adjust gradually, but for others, it means taking on a whole new identity. For instance, it's not at all uncommon for converts to take on a new name,

in order to create a new wineskin capable of holding the new wine that they've become. Abram became Abraham. Simon became Peter. Saul became Paul. Isabella Baumfree become Sojourner Truth. Mike King became Martin Luther King. Malcolm Little became Malcolm X. And so on. That's a way of creating a new wineskin, a new form of existence, for the new wine that they've become. It's a way of integrating that strong and overwhelming experience into the fabric of a new existence, so that the seams don't burst and the stitches don't come undone. There too, the grace of the world reveals itself, holding the new convert tight.

The music lessons were nearly over, but I was still lost in thought. This time, I was thinking about you, about us, about what it is to be a church together after all we've been through this past year and a half. There have been times over the past month that I've felt the same tremors here that I did that evening at the music school. We've returned to the way things were, and everything is more or less the same. That's a good thing, and there's comfort to be found in returning to the familiar. But I think we're different now. The past year and a half have changed us, in ways that are still hard to articulate. We've confronted two global pandemics. One of them has to do with a stubborn virus, and one of them has to do with the stubborn hold that racism has upon our culture. We've witnessed the unthinkable – an insurrection launched by a sitting US President, and we've seen climate disasters strengthen and intensify. And that's not even accounting for all the small but notable shifts in our daily lives – the masks, the online shopping, the isolation, and the relational challenges. Given all that, we can thank God that we have this stable, firm foundation of faith to which we can return. We can thank God that amidst all the foundations built upon sand, foundations that are now trembling, we have something solid upon which to stand. We can thank God that we have a place to turn to when things are feeling unsteady. Even so, as we've sung the hymns and the doxology over the past several weeks, as we've spoken the call to worship and offered the Lord's Prayer, I've been aware that the weird, the uncanny, and the unheimlich, have found us here too. Have you felt it? Even here, or perhaps especially here, Jesus's words ring true: it's difficult to put new wine into old wineskins.

I don't think that we need to overturn our traditions, our habits, or our histories in order to make new wineskins of and for ourselves. I don't think we need to scrap our liturgy or invent a whole new identity for ourselves to accommodate the changes wrought upon us and within us. But I do wonder if, as in Gunter Grass's novel, we might need mechanisms, rituals, ceremonies that allow us to integrate who we've become with who we once were. That's why next week when you come to church, the ministers will be handing out cutting boards and onions at the door – I'm kidding! We don't need to peel and cut onions together in order to make ourselves cry, but we might need to consciously attend to the ways we're different. Like catching up with an old friend, like engaging with the world again after a season of grief, like figuring out a new identity after undergoing a kind of conversion, we might need to trust that there is a grace, a kind of divine power in things that helps to create new wineskins in which to place the new wine that we now are.

In the coming weeks, we'll have opportunities to engage in two outreach projects together – welcoming refugees and participating in a Habitat for Humanity build. Those are important aspects of what it means to come back together, to stitch new wineskins for our community. But we've also started planning for two further events that can help in that regard, events meant to encourage a spiritual and prayerful introspection about all that's happened to us individually and

collectively. The first is a community memorial service to be held on Saturday October 30th as a part of All Saint's Weekend. We haven't been able to hold memorial services for much of the past year and a half, and we need to find a way to honor all of those who we've lost during that time. If you've lost someone, I hope you'll consider joining us that afternoon. Whether you've lost someone dear to you or not, we've all lost important things during these many long months, and this service will be a way of helping us to acknowledge those losses, integrating what we've been through with who we've now become. A new friend, Dr. Michael White, and his traditional jazz ensemble, will be here to help us in that work. The following morning, Michael and his band will provide an entire jazz worship experience for us. That'll be one way of peeling the onion, which is to say, of allowing the Spirit of God to help us as we stitch new wineskins for ourselves.

The second event is one that our deacons suggested when we met last week. As I described to them some of the thoughts that I've now shared with you, they wondered if there were a way that we could reflect together on the ways all of our experiences over the past year and a half have changed us. And so in November, likely on the 14th, we're hoping to conduct a kind of storytelling event after church, when each of you will be invited to reflect upon, and to share, some of what you've been through, and what it has meant to you. For some of us, I know, the changes can barely be seen – they're microscopic. But they're still there, and they ask to be articulated and spoken. For others of us, the changes are larger – a whole reordering of life has taken place. We need to find ways to speak those things to one another. And we need to trust that God, that grace, that Jesus himself is gently, tenderly, hopefully, allowing us to stitch together new wineskins that can hold what and who we're becoming.

I've gone on too long by now. I can see Carleen shifting restlessly behind me. But let me conclude by returning to the scene with which I began: the tears of those in the Onion Club. It's an apt and appropriate image, for as it was then, so it is now: there is much over which we might weep. But I would have us know that after weeping comes joy. After the old Jerusalem has passed, the new Jerusalem will come, and, as the book of Revelation has it, God will wipe every tear from our eyes. It is a hopeful future that I anticipate, because it is a God of hope who stitches us, and who stitches the world back together again.