

Our next reading will be from the gospels. We are in the midst of a series in worship where we are reading lots and lots of the parables that Jesus told. Parables are stories that Jesus told using everyday images to convey deeper messages.

Today we will be reading from the gospel of Matthew which is the first book in the New Testament of the Bible. We are going to expand our reading from what is listed in the bulletin because I want us to have a sense of the events surrounding Jesus when he shares the parable we will be reading.

We will hear about Jesus calling a man named Matthew who is a tax collector to become one of his followers. Tax collectors never are given a good image in the Bible. Is Matthew a scoundrel or is he just an everyday person stuck trying to make ends meet in a job he does not like? Ask yourself that as we read this passage.

After hearing about Matthew responding to the call of Jesus we will hear a parable from Jesus about new wine and old wineskins. Ask yourself what you think this may mean for people like Matthew. What does it mean for your life? And what does it mean for our society during this time of change?

Read Matthew 9:9-17

A big event occurred this week as most of us are aware. Some of us have been posting our feelings about this transition. This event meant the end of something that some of us describe as glorious while others of us describe as disastrous. This ending has brought sadness to many of us while it has come as a relief to others of us.

I am, of course, referring to the news that the Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus is shutting down operations after 146 years. My guess is that you were thinking I was going someplace else with my opening description. We are certainly in a time of political transition in this country but I want to spend some time talking about the end of the Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus.

First of all I was pleasantly surprised to discover this week that the original Ringling brothers migrated from Germany and settled in the town of McGregor, Iowa. Who knew? I understand that Wisconsin claims them as their own because that is where they began their circus but when they originally moved to the US the Ringling brothers settled in McGregor.

As a kid my parents took me to see the Ringling Brothers Circus at the Carolina Coliseum in Columbia. In fact, some folks may know the name of the large room that was in the basement of the old Carolina Coliseum. It was called the Elephant Room. It was in this place where the elephants and other animals would arrive after their parade from the containers that brought them to the city. The animals and all of the performers would then do their show from one of the three circles on the floor of the coliseum.

I can remember seeing the elephants stand like falling dominoes on each other's backs. I can remember the man with the white hair cracking the whip with the tigers in the pin. I can remember the high flying trapeze artists. And I can remember the numerous salesmen walking around in the stands trying to entice kids to pester their parents to buy them the fun hat or the cotton candy.

Those are my memories as a young child in Columbia. But what eventually was revealed was the cruelty to the animals and a show that became dated over time. Children like me grew up and discovered that our innocence had been replaced with realism.

The show was not as it seemed. We also began to exist in an era which no longer accepted an old model of success in a new age.

Jan Edmiston is one of the two current moderators of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA. Jan shared in her blog this week her reflections on the ending of the circus. She writes:

“The news that Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus is shutting down didn’t feel tragic to me. I remember marveling over the Ringling Brothers Circus as a child but I almost slept through it in the early ’90s too. It struck me as dated. The Big Apple, a different circus, was more impressive to me. Fewer animal tricks (which are often achieved through cruelty) and more human skill.

Life can be a circus,” Jan says. “Some of us love a circus (the more rings, the better) and some of us prefer a quiet corner with a book. But things need to get done in this world and there is much work to do. Let’s learn from the circus,” Jan suggests.

Jan then shares these learnings from the circus:

“Cruelty might seem to get results, but in the long run, somebody notices that the elephants are in pain and it is evil.

It’s better to have one ring of excellence than three rings of mediocre.

The casual observer wonders how someone can possibly fling herself off a trapeze and live. But that trapeze artist is – in fact – A) an artist and B) extremely well-rehearsed. Skills require lots of practice. And sometimes good work is simply an art.”

And her final observation, “Some clowns are scary.”

Jan concludes with the following advice. “So, my friends, find your art. Practice every day and you will be able to do amazing things. Don’t be cruel. And don’t be a scary clown.”

Jesus says that it is important to only put new wine into new wineskins. Jesus knows that if you try to put new wine into old wineskins they will burst and the wine will seep out and be no good to anyone.

So what can this parable teach us today? After all we do not store wine in wineskins anymore. We cap it in a bottle. But I wonder if one of the learnings that Jesus wanted us to leave with from him was a sense that to be faithful to God means being open to God stirring us in new ways and showing us new expressions of God's love. If we look for God in the ways that maybe we have experienced God in the past then we may miss what God is doing now. God is always about creating and re-creating the new.

Today we are joined by 24 youth including 4 from this congregation who have begun confirmation together. They are now wrapping up their retreat at Bethelwoods and are here in worship. As they wrap up their confirmation retreat I wonder if we who are currently in the church are the old wineskins that need to make some adaptations so that their new wine is not lost. How willing are we in the church to listen to their expressions of faith?

Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus lasted for 146 years. But ultimately their model was no longer functional in our culture. Is the church another version of an institution which is stuck on believing that its old model will continue to be successful?

So I invite all of us to leave this place with open minds and open hearts to see what God is doing in new ways. Don't get trapped into old ways of thinking and believing. Be open to what God is doing that is new.

Ringling Brothers Circus is going away. But Cirque de Soleil is going strong. We will always be looking for new ways to be amazed by the gifts and abilities of artists.

May we also be open to the new ways that God is at work and not be stuck trying to be old wineskins when God is producing new wine to share. AMEN.

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-Edmiston, Jan, <https://achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com/>

-Given: January 22, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)