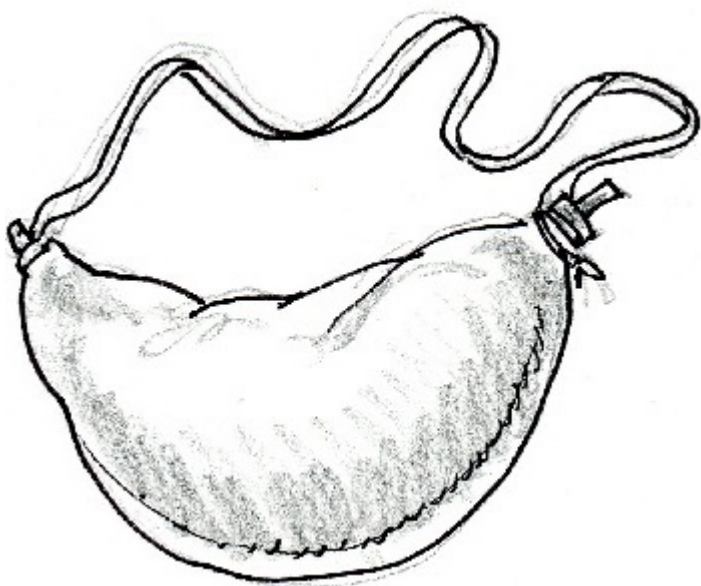


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by Pat Marrin

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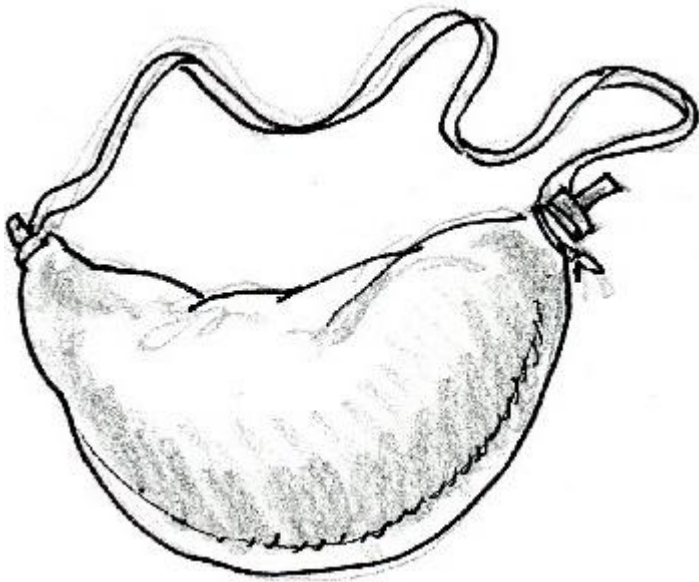
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“No one pours new wine into old wineskins” (Luke 5:37).

It is said that if you ask an Irish person a question, they will answer with another questions. “Got a stamp?” “Are you sending a letter?” It seems that if anyone asked Jesus a question, he answered with a parable.

The scribes and Pharisees quiz Jesus on why his disciples didn’t follow the example of John the Baptist’s and their own disciples by fasting. Jesus answered with three short metaphors loaded with meaning and challenging insights. His disciples live in the New Age. Fasting is a discipline for those awaiting fulfillment. Now is the time to celebrate, like guests at a wedding. Old structures cannot contain this joy. Who puts fermenting wine in already stretched skins? Or a preshrunk patch on an old cloak? The skins will burst and the patch will pull away from the garment.

These little images have survived as brilliant descriptions of the tension between tradition and innovation. Tradition is good, as a final image affirms, like old wine that is stable and rich to the taste. But life is dynamic and ever-changing. Structure defines everything in predictable ways, but it is often unprepared for surprises and slow to adapt. Institutions lose their flexibility and become self-preserving and unresponsive to new ideas.

A frequent and potent image in Jesus’ repertoire is the wedding feast. Weddings are about beginnings, the future, the joy of love whose dreams are still undefined by adversity. The scribes and Pharisees were like dour older couples who know the score and impose their own limits on the hopes of the young. “Wait until reality sets

in. Life is hard and the honeymoon is soon over. Then it is back to fasting and sacrifice.”

For Jesus, the coming of God’s Kingdom was a new moment, signaling a new covenant that would never be withdrawn, only deepened by the demands of real love. The bridegroom was present, so his disciples were right to enjoy the nuptial banquet, allowed to suspend the rules of religion to feast and enjoy the wine of gladness. The time would come when suffering was required, but even this would reveal something new and be celebrated with the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.

The parables of Jesus are not just lessons; they are teachers that accompany us and help us interpret our experiences in new ways. New wine is a way of life, an invitation to effervescence and expansion. It is an attitude that encourages us to laugh out loud and speak our truth to a sober, cautious world of artificial limits and social censorship. The wedding is on, even in the face of sadness and loss, because hope conquers fear, and love is stronger than death.

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