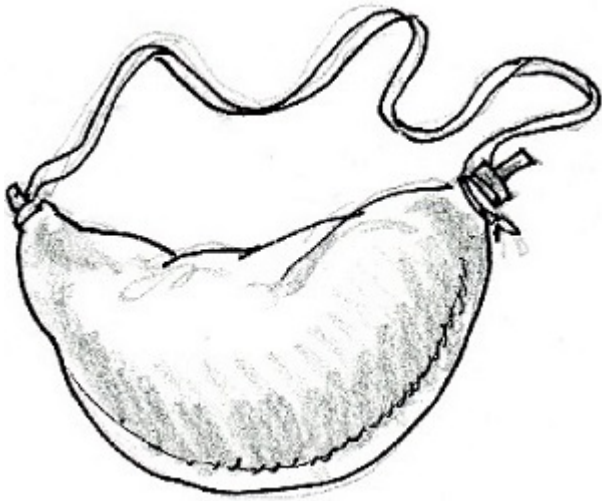


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by Pat Marrin

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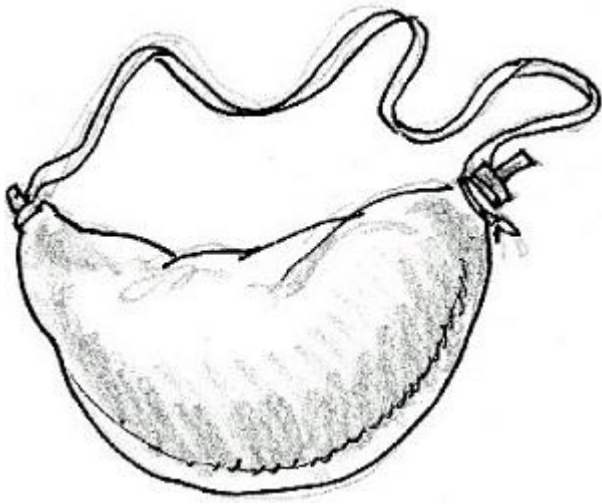
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“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?” (Mark 2:19).

1 Samuel 15:16-23; Mark 2:18-22

Fasting in the Bible is associated with penance and sorrow. People fasted during prayer to intensify their longing for God. The Psalms are filled with images of hunger and thirst as part of keeping vigil and waiting for God to come. All adult Jews, including the disciples of John and of the Pharisees, practiced weekly fasting to keep their focus on God’s promises. The only time this ritual fasting was suspended was for major feasts and during weddings.

Mark uses this contrast between fasting and feasting to emphasize that with the coming of Jesus, God was now present. Jesus was the bridegroom, and the reign of God was like a wedding feast. Heaven had come to earth. The marriage of human and divine in Jesus was the signal to celebrate. The fourth Gospel develops this theme with the story of the wedding at Cana as the moment when Jesus formally begins his ministry. The large ceremonial jars of water used for ritual purification are turned into wine, another sign of fulfillment. Longing gives way to joy; obedience to the Law is replaced by an outpouring of love.

Jesus offers two images to describe this shift from the first covenant under the Law to the new covenant of divine love. Law is about setting limits, defining obligations and refraining from sin. Love is about opening the heart to freely respond to need, putting compassion above caution, stretching limits and crossing barriers to include untouchables and outcasts. The short parables of the new patch sewn on an old garment and the need for new wine skins to hold new wine illustrate the expansiveness of love that requires flexible institutions and open discernment.

The Eucharist is always a nuptial banquet. We experience the extravagance of Jesus' gift of himself as the source of our new life. It is still an act of faith, and we get only a glimpse of what is to come and a taste of the heavenly bread that is our pledge of future glory. The Bridegroom is here and not yet here. The risen Christ is the future appearing in the present, calling us to take up our baptismal discipleship in order to finish what God has begun in us.

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