

## KINGDOM OF PROGRESS

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Series: Stories Jesus Told

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Jesus, Parables, Kingdom of God, Wineskins, Tradition

Matthew 9:16-17, Luke 5:39

I want to try a little visualization exercise with you this morning - a little imagination work. Do me a favor and close your eyes. Imagine that you're in a matatu. The matatu is at the stage, it's full of people, and it's ready to go. Now, imagine that someone brings two horses to the front of the matatu and they begin to discuss with the driver just how to hook the horses up to the front of the matatu so they can pull it. And the driver reaches through a hole in the front windscreen to take the reigns of the horses while the men in front begin connecting the horses to the front bumper.

You ask the driver about the horses and he says, "Yes! This is a *very traditional* matatu. My family has been using horses in transportation for many generations. We've found this to be a very cost effective and reliable mode of transportation. You never have to worry about running out of fuel or the engine quitting. Even if a horse dies, you can simply replace it with another horse. Our family has many, so our matatus are very reliable."

What would you think about that? Would you stay in that matatu? Would you expect it to get you to where you want to go in a reasonable amount of time? Does a horse-drawn matatu make any sense at all? I mean, that used to be how people got around, right? Horse-drawn carriages and such. If it worked for them, why wouldn't it work for us?

The question, of course, that I'm begging with this ridiculous illustration is this: Is the traditional way always the best way? Are time-honored traditions timelessly effective?

Jesus actually faced this same question 2000 years ago. Back then, it wasn't a question about transportation (donkeys were the preferred method). The questions Jesus faced were about something much more important - they were about the way human beings interact with God and each other.

You see, when you read the bible, what you'll discover is that this entire collection of books - because that's what the bible is - a collection of books, rather than a cohesive book written by a single author - this collection of books is really about one thing: how human beings and God interact with each other. God loves us. Do we love God? God loves other people. Do we love other people? All of the instructions in the bible can be boiled down to those two things.

And the biblical authors sort of chronicle our human understanding of God over the course of several thousand years.

But somewhere along the way, we got stuck in a rut. Jesus tried to get us out of that rut during his time on earth, and for some people, he succeeded, but I think we have a tendency to find new ruts all the time. God has set us on a course for a certain destination, but sometimes we get stuck. We fail to move forward.

Today, as we continue our series called *Stories Jesus Told*, I want to look at a couple of illustrations Jesus used to show us that the Kingdom of God is a *Kingdom of Progress*.

But first, let me pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

### **Prayer**

If you study the life of Jesus in-depth, one of the things you quickly discover is that he was a walking contradiction. He was all at once a non-conformist and a strict adherent to God's ways. He was a peacemaker and a pot-stirrer. He was gentle and powerful. He was conservative and progressive.

I once heard a lecturer argue that Jesus was both the ultimate conservative *and* the ultimate liberal. Conservative because he had a deep desire to return to the ways of God, but liberal because he felt the freedom to walk away from many traditional ways of thinking in order to help people find the truth. He was somehow looking back and moving forward simultaneously.

And for me, that perspective really highlights something that we should probably keep in mind as we think about our lives in relationship to God and his Kingdom, and that is this: At both ends of the timeline of human existence, things are very good. They are perfect. When things started out for us, God created everything to be good and perfect. When things end for us, God will once again restore everything to that perfected state. In between, of course, we keep messing things up.

But I think it's important for us to remember the perfection of the beginning and end. Because it is with those two perfections in view that Jesus lived his life. That's why he pressed forward in his mission, because he knew that only by moving forward - away from some of the traditional ways of thinking and acting - could we truly return to God's desired way of life.

And Jesus' insistence on this progressive way of thinking and talking and acting got him in trouble with some of the religious people. In the book of Matthew, the first book of what we call the new testament, we find Jesus doing all the wrong things...at least in the eyes of the

religious folks. In Matthew chapter 9, he first forgives a man's sins, which he hadn't been given authority by the temple leaders to do (you see, they thought only they had the authority to do that), then, just for show, he healed that same guy from being paralyzed. He said, "Hey religious leaders, you don't think God has given me authority to forgive sins? OK, how about this. Sir, get up and walk." And the guy stood up and walked home!

Then, Jesus went and found a tax collector named Matthew - actually sought the guy out - and hosted a big party at Matthew's house full of unsavory people - people the religious folks didn't think you should hang out with. It would be like me going out today and finding a police officer or government official I knew was corrupt, and throwing a big party at his house for all the other corrupt officials, plus some drug dealers, prostitutes, and maybe a few known terrorists. That's what Jesus did.

Then, some followers of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, started asking him questions about fasting. You see, these guys were kind of on the religious fringe too, but they saw that they were more traditionally religious than Jesus' followers. They said, "Hey, we've noticed that we fast (or go without food for the purpose of spiritual focus) and so do the Pharisees (the religious leaders), but your disciples - your followers - don't fast. In other words, we observe the traditional fasts and feasts of the Jewish calendar, but you guys just seem to do whatever you want!

Jesus, in their eyes, was failing to act like a religious leader. There were a lot of people following him around and calling him Rabbi or Teacher, but he wasn't acting like a rabbi. He wasn't doing it right in the eyes of the religious people. He was saying things he shouldn't say, doing things he shouldn't do, hanging out with the wrong kinds of people, and failing to observe (or to teach his followers to observe) the religious traditions. He was, I'm sure, seen as a hypocrite in the eyes of many faithful observers.

And when he was confronted about these things, Jesus did what he often did, he told a confusing story. Two in this case. When these religious guys started basically asking Jesus why he wasn't doing things in a traditional way, he said this (Matthew 9:16-17):

*"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."*

*Matthew 9:16-17*

And I can just see those religious leaders and John's disciples and whoever was listening looking at each other like, "Uh...yes, both of those things are true...but what is this guy talking about?" I mean, Jesus wasn't giving lessons in tailoring and winemaking here. These

are things that everyone already knew, and he was saying them in response to being asked why he wasn't doing the things that were expected of him as a religious leader.

And then, in the book of Matthew, it seems like he was maybe interrupted. He said these things - the obvious statements - and before he had time to connect them to a larger point, a guy came up to him and started talking about his dead daughter.

And maybe Jesus would have gone on to explain what he meant here...or maybe he wouldn't have. But he certainly seemed to have a point. So what was it?

In retrospect, I think it seems pretty clear. Jesus was saying:

**The old ways won't work anymore.**

Throughout history, this has been a rallying cry for cultural, spiritual, and systemic revolution within the church of Jesus. The old ways won't work anymore.

This, of course, is a great comfort to those who don't fit or have trouble reconciling with the old ways. It's of great concern for those who are quite comfortable with the old ways. That's why Jesus was so popular among Gentiles, women, slaves, and people who didn't really fit in the old temple system. And it's why he was so unpopular with the religious leaders who were quite happy with the old ways of doing things.

Because, you see, when change comes, we tend to have two responses. When something new comes along, we either cling to the old ways, determined to make them work, or we embrace the new ways, eager to see how they help us progress forward. We either try to hitch horses to our matatu or we turn the key to bring the engine roaring to life.

When we talk about God's Kingdom being a Kingdom of Progress, this is what we mean. God is primarily concerned about us getting to a certain destination - of moving forward. He is not primarily concerned with how we've always done things - with our traditions - with our methods. The methods of the church have changed and will change over time, but the destination is the same. That's why here at Trinity, we don't get too hung up on methods. There are certain things we do and ways we do them, but they are not sacred to us. We'll change things over time and we'll do so without a whole lot of fanfare.

The destination is the most important thing. The methods and tools and means by which we get there are secondary.

So what was Jesus saying here about the cloth and wineskins? Let's look at them one at a time. First, Jesus says:

*“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.”*

*Matthew 9:16*

Now, I'm not a sewing guy. I mean, I grew up around needles, thread, sewing machines and things like that because my mom sewed, so I might be able, in a pinch, to sew something together, but I don't really know much about sewing. Jesus, though, makes a whole lot of sense here to me. If you think about a fabric that really shrinks a lot - maybe wool, which was quite common in those days. If you take a garment that is well worn and shrunken and put a brand new patch on it, the first time you wash it, that patch is going to shrink while the rest of the garment doesn't shrink. And soon enough, you'll have another hole - maybe worse than it was before. It makes sense.

Then Jesus says:

*“Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”*

*Matthew 9:17*

Now this is something that most of us are completely unfamiliar with. We don't really use wineskins today. Winemakers don't even use wineskins. But in the ancient middle east, this was a pretty common way to store and carry wine. They would use a sheep skin - the part from the neck down to the front legs - and would tie it up in such a way that it would hold wine or water or other liquids.

The thing was, as the wine aged and fermented, the escaping gasses, combined with the weight of the wine, would stretch the skin, which was fine. That's what the skin was supposed to do - to stretch and grow as the wine aged. However, the skin lost elasticity over time. It dried out. And when the wine was poured out of the skin, the skin stayed in it's stretched state. It didn't shrink back down to its original size.

And what Jesus is saying here - what everyone knew - is that if you then tried to put new wine into that old wineskin, the new wine would release the same gasses and the skin would try to expand again, except, since it was already stretched out and dry and brittle, it would just burst.

Now, without trying to take the metaphors too far, I think it's clear what Jesus is saying here. He's saying “I am the new wine. I am the unshrunk cloth. It's not going to work to just patch me onto the old system - to pour me into the old ways of doing things. That will destroy everything.”

You see, the old ways wouldn't work with Jesus. They were as incompatible as matatus and horses. Jesus was announcing that a new day had dawned, but the religious leaders were still acting like it was nighttime. They were, metaphorically speaking, so concerned with keeping their lamps and torches lit that they didn't notice it was daylight outside. They were stuck in their nighttime rituals. And so, Jesus' ways were incompatible with the old ways of the temple. They were as different as day and night.

This, of course, caused a great rift in the ancient church. In fact, this incompatibility defined the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church of Jesus. Though Jesus came and made himself known first to the Jews in Israel, the fact remained that the old way of the Jewish temple was incompatible with the way of Jesus. People had to choose. And so do we.

Now, most of us here haven't ever been and never will be forced to choose between the ancient rites of the Jewish temple system and the way of Jesus. We don't live in that time or place. But Jesus does ask us, on a regular basis, to choose between *his* way of doing things and our *old ways* of thinking, speaking, and acting.

And church people tend to get in trouble and cause a lot of trouble when we get stuck. In fact, over 2000 years of church history, we as a global church have found ourselves seriously stuck about every 500 years.

First, it was Jesus bucking the traditional church power systems and saying, "The old ways won't work anymore."

Then, about 500 years later, Pope Gregory I insisted that the old ways wouldn't work anymore as he took the Catholic papacy off its high pedestal and lived a more monastic life. Likewise, he encouraged the monastic orders which would use their understated and sometimes underground approach to maintain and preserve the Christian faith through the Dark Ages.

500 years after Gregory was the Great Schism - a division between the eastern and western churches that created what we now call Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The Eastern Churches looked at the Pope and said, "The old ways won't work anymore!" as they tried to contextualize their expression in an increasingly Muslim world.

500 years after the Great Schism was the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others challenged many of the traditions of the Catholic church. They argued that somehow tradition had come to supersede scripture and that many of the traditions of the church had no root in anything remotely related to God, Jesus, or the bible. Those old ways, as traditional and beloved as they may be, won't work anymore.

And now, 500 years after the Reformation, we stand here today. And I ask you this question: Are you stuck? Are we stuck? Has the global church found itself in a rut again? Have you found yourself in a rut in your faith? What reformation, what revolution is needed in your life and in this world?

God's Kingdom is a Kingdom of progress. It is a Kingdom that is rapidly advancing. It is moving at speed toward God's desire and design for this world. If we want to be on that train, we have to be willing to leave behind the old garments and old wineskins. We have to be willing to set aside our beloved traditions when they begin to get in the way of the thing God is doing.

Understand, there's nothing wrong with traditions. Just because something is old doesn't make it bad (nor does it make it good). But when the old ways are incompatible with what Jesus is doing here and now, then something has to go. We can choose to stick to our old ways, or we can join Jesus in his progressive Kingdom, pursuing his goals and his destination.

What does that mean for us as a church? It means that we aren't afraid of a rapidly changing culture here in Kenya and around the world. It means that we aren't scared of globalization, that we don't shy away from cultural shifts, that we don't stand on the sidelines as the world changes.

Instead, we engage culture, we embrace change, we make sure that we, as a church and as individuals, are up to speed with the Kingdom of God. Because change never catches God off guard. He's always moving right along with it. But sometimes his people lag behind. The church simply can't afford to lag behind right now.

That's why we have a vision to create Agora - a hub of life for this city. In the space that we will occupy in just under 5 weeks, we envision a place where the people of Nakuru will work, play, create, and believe - a space where great things will happen, where relationships will be initiated and cultivated, where kids, youth, and adults will come to be part of something larger than themselves.

We plan to start with some really practical needs of our immediate community - a coworking space and a playground. The coworking space can also be a social space and an event space for adults and teens. The playground can be a gathering place for families with young kids.

In Jesus' day, he helped fishermen catch more fish, turned water to wine for the benefit of social interaction, and invited the little children to come to him. This is our modern way of doing the same - helping entrepreneurs and small business people by providing a space for



them to work, offering opportunities and events for social engagement, and building a dedicated space for kids to laugh and play together.

As we go along, we'll add more activities and programs, always attempting to keep our finger on the pulse of the culture. We pray that God will allow Agora to be a hub of progress for the city of Nakuru and a model for other communities.

Is that too big of a vision? I hope so. I hope it's such a big vision that we won't ever come close to accomplishing it without the direct work of our God. At the end of the day, there is no greater indicator of participation with God than to say, "We could have never done this on our own. Only God could have made this happen."

If we are keeping pace with God's Kingdom of Progress, then he will be right there to help us along.

Oh, one more thing. In the gospel of Luke, these same two illustrations are highlighted, but with this addendum. After Jesus talks about the wine and wineskins, he says this, in Luke 5:39

*"And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.'"*  
Luke 5:39

You see, progress is an uphill battle. We like our old comfortable ways. We like our traditions. We like the comfort that we've slipped into over the years. We like the old wine. But Jesus is the new wine. And so we must choose. Do we choose comfort or do we choose Jesus? Do we choose our old ways or do we choose Jesus. Do we choose our traditions or do we choose Jesus?

If we choose Jesus - if we choose the way of the Kingdom of Progress - people will look at us funny. Church people might not like us very much. Hey, I've already heard the whispers. "That Trinity church, they don't even dress up on Sundays. Their pastor preaches in jeans. I've even heard they're encouraged to hang out with people who don't go to church. Tsk. Tsk. Tsk."

Look, it would be nice if choosing the way of the Kingdom of God didn't mean facing opposition. It would be great if that opposition didn't come most often from those *inside* the church. But I suspect that if Jesus faced that kind of "friendly fire," then the more we act like him, the more we'll face ourselves. He's a progressive Savior in a progressive Kingdom. Choosing his way means we move forward. We change. We ditch the horse and carriage and jump in God's matatu. We choose Jesus.



Every 500 years, the global church faces this decision. You and I face it every single day. Do we choose the comfortable old ways of doing things, or do we choose Jesus? What's your choice?

Let's pray.

## **Prayer**

We're going to move now into a time of personal response. And there several ways to respond:

### **1. Singing**

We're going to sing some songs together that help us reflect on some of these things.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

### **2. Prayer**

If you need prayer for anything at all, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

### **3. Communion**

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember the way he willingly died for us. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us.

We have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

### **4. Giving**

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

### **Closing Prayer**