

**Sermon:** The Art of Relevance

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**Preacher:** Rev'd Mike Rayson, OSL

**Church:** Nameoki United Methodist

*"No one sews a piece of new, unshrunk cloth on old clothes; otherwise, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and makes a worse tear. No one pours new wine into old leather wineskins; otherwise, the wine would burst the wineskins and the wine would be lost and the wineskins destroyed. But new wine is for new wineskins."* **Mark 2:20-22, CEB**

Back in 1899, Charles H Duell, the United States Commissioner of Patents said... "Everything that can be invented has been invented."

In 1903, whilst advising the Michigan Savings Bank not to invest in the new "Ford Motor Company", one of the bank presidents proclaimed... "The horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty, a fad."

Joseph P Kennedy – the father of JFK, Teddy, Bobby, Eunice, Joseph Jr and Jean remarked back in 1936... "I have no political ambitions for myself or my children."

Some of you were already knocking around back in 1943. That was the year that Thomas Watson, president of IBM said... "I think there a world market for maybe five computers."

"You ain't going nowhere son. You ought to go back to driving a truck." said Grand Ole Opry's Jim Denny to Elvis Presley in 1956.

Dr Ian G. McDonald, a Los Angeles surgeon was quoted in the magazine Newsweek on Nov. 18, 1963 saying – "For the majority of people, the use of tobacco has a beneficial effect."

1977... that was the year Ken Olsen, president of Digital Equipment Corporation remarked that he saw... "no need for any individual to have a computer in their home."

Hot on his heels in 1981, Bill Gates – although he denies it – has been widely reported as saying... "640k ought to be enough computer memory for anybody." And if you don't quite know how much memory 640K is, my computer has 500,000 times that much memory – and it's considered a pretty low end computer.

As we find ourselves in the Jesus parables this morning, we are going to talk about the subject of 'relevance'. Is Jesus still relevant to our world? Is the United Methodist Church relevant? Are we 'relevant'?

As I shared with you a couple of weeks ago, there is a survey knocking around that identifies 3 reasons why people around the world are walking away from the church.

1. Church is too boring.
2. Church is not relevant to my life
3. All the church wants from me is my money.

We've talked about money... so this morning, using the parable of new wine and old wineskins, I'm going to talk for a bit about relevance.

John Wesley was seen by many as largely irrelevant when the Methodist movement had its humble beginnings in the 18th century. The Christian group that he and his brother Charles were a part of at Oxford were often ridiculed by those around them – including the established church. They were called ‘bible moths’, ‘the holy club’ and ‘Methodists’... and it seemed that last one stuck. But the term itself was meant as ridicule and slander.

But Wesley knew that he was onto something that would be ‘relevant’ to those the middle and upper class institutionalized church had marginalized and pushed away – the poor and the disenfranchised.

One of his famous quotes on the subject of the relevance of the Methodist movement from later in his life goes like this...

*“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”*

So, is the United Methodist Church relevant to our society?

The answer is both yes... and no.

Let’s first look at the no, and to do that I need to look at statistics.

The median age of the UMC in North America is... 57. The median age of the United States is 36.7. A sure warning sign that we are dangerously irrelevant to society, by being weighted heavily on the side of age.

In the United Methodist Church, women make up only 24% of the clergy. The majority of church employees are women... but the clergy are overwhelmingly male. This seems to be a sure sign that with an emphasis on gender inequality, we are wasting away into a sea of irrelevance.

Each Sunday, 25% of women in the pews are worshipping without their husbands in United Methodist churches, with the gender balance usually around 61% female, 39% male.

So, it seems that church surely is irrelevant – especially to men.

I could sit here and name a dozen or more other statistics that point to the irrelevance of Wesley’s movement... and we would all reach the conclusion that YES the United Methodist church is outdated, outmoded, and completely irrelevant.

But pish tosh to statistics!

The church is ONLY irrelevant when it FAILS to preach and live the RELEVANT gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we live up to ‘who we are’, instead of holding onto the church practises of 10, 20, 50, 100 or 300 years ago in the time of Wesley, then there is no way we cannot be relevant to society.

Christianity in the Methodist tradition has MUCH to say to our world.

Firstly, God has called and chosen each of us to live in relationship with him, by his grace. He has invited us into his family – for God at his very nature is a family – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have extended to you an invitation to share in the relationship in which they share together. A place where we find true acceptance, true forgiveness, true fellowship – where a place has been set for us at the table – each and everyone of us!

The bible clearly says that God so loved THE world, not just parts of the world or certain sections of people whom God has chosen as many Calvinists and others would claim, but the whole entirety of creation.

God so loved THE world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. He has reached out to ALL of us, not some of us.

United Methodists believe that God has stepped forward to establish a relationship with us and invites us to the table. We believe that salvation is not necessarily just a dated fact – that in 1953 at 7.42pm after Reverend George preached an inspiring sermon we went down to the altar and got ourselves saved – but an ongoing reality. We were saved, we are saved, we are being saved. God is doing a transforming work within each and every one of us.

Too many people rest on a single time and date in their lives, believing that they prayed the sinners prayer at the altar, and it's all ok with them. That is not something Mr Wesley taught. John taught us to live out our faith – daily being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. And that is not an irrelevant message. That is good news!

Methodists believe in works of piety and acts of mercy. This basically means that for a Methodist who has experienced the ongoing work of salvation – and is LIVING that ongoing work – that our devotion to and love of Jesus Christ will manifest itself in 2 ways.

Firstly, we shall be inspired to acts of piety. Worship, prayer, devotion, reading the scriptures... and then out of that, inspired to acts of mercy. Caring for our neighbours, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, healing the sick and infirm...

Faith without works is DEAD. Dead dead dead dead dead. You cannot have works of piety evident in your life without corresponding acts of mercy.

You are called to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ privately and publically – with your life as a witness to the greatness of God.

And that is not an irrelevant message. That is good news!

Thirdly, Methodists and Wesleyans are a grace-filled people.

Grace is a much used and abused word. In a nutshell, it means the precious and unmerited favour of God. But John Wesley went further, and broke it down into 3 categories.

Prevenient grace... the grace that exists drawing us into relationship with God even when we are not aware that grace is at work aroundabout us drawing us deeper and closer into relationship with God.

Justifying grace. The grace that takes your fears and failures, your mishaps and misfortune, your stupidity and your sinfulness, and drowns it in the sea. This is perhaps the hardest form of grace we could wrap our minds around. That God would actually grant us such a cleansing and purifying gift as this. That our lives, though once like the color scarlet because of our sin, are now cleansed to be as white as snow in the eyes of God.

And Sanctifying grace. We should be going on to perfection, as Mr Wesley once said. It's not enough to experience the grace that draws us to God and the grace that cleanses our lives free from sin. We are called to every day keep striving to run the race set before us. To experience God at work in our lives making all things new. To daily become more like Jesus.

God gives us the grace to keep on keeping on... to reach out into our communities, and inspired and filled by the light of the world, to allow the Jesus in us to change both us and the people around us.

And that is not an irrelevant message. That is good news!

If we, as a denomination, would consistently preach relationship with God, works of piety and acts of mercy, and above all things grace – as shown to us in the scriptures - than we CANNOT FAIL TO BE A RELEVANT CHURCH.

So are we irrelevant as a denomination – in some places, places that have neglected the word of God and preached a false gospel, you can be sure that we are irrelevant. But when the WORD of God is consistently lifted up, and by WORD I mean Jesus Christ, WE WILL NEVER BE IRRELEVANT AGAIN.

Closer to home, is Nameoki United Methodist Church a relevant church to the community of Granite City?

Well, it seems that our congregation has gone through some changes – especially in the last 50 years since this beautiful building was completed. Some of those changes are very evident.

I doubt there was a screen here 50 years ago... or a set of drums. Or even, well, air conditioning!

I don't know the story of how things came to be, but... I bet that when the projector was first installed, there was some grumbling that came with it. Who needs that new fangled technology – and whats wrong with the hymnbooks!!

You could look at such things, and declare that even if you don't like the changes, at least the church has tried to be 'relevant' to a younger demographic.

But do these things make us truly relevant to our community? The answer is, in and of themselves, they make us no more relevant than putting a new set of tires on an old worn out car. Or a fresh coat of paint on a crumbling old condemned building.

IN 1985, Apple Computers released the Mac Plus. It was a computer that revolutionised the computing world. It was expensive, had just a tiny fragment of memory, it was big and bulky... but in its day, it was the bee's knees!

Apple Computers are the computers of choice for the recording industry. And a programme called "pro tools" is the programme of choice for many studio engineers. Pro Tools is a huge programme, requiring hundreds of megabytes of space and memory to perform its tasks adequately.

If I tried to load Pro Tools onto a 1985 Mac Plus computer, the Mac Plus would crash and burn.

Between 1985 and today, there have been over 80 complete system upgrades for Macintosh computers. And the result today is the macbook air! This new machine is incredible. As thin as a few sheets of paper, this little baby is a powerful machine. It can do what few other laptops can do. It has no moving parts!

The new Macbook air is completely capable of running Pro Tools. And it's so small, that you can set up an almost totally professional recording studio on your dining room table!!!

Friends... Jesus says you can't put new wine into old wineskins. This is a practical word as it is a spiritual word. If, back then, you poured the wine ready for fermentation into an old wineskin that had been used before, the fermentation process would cause the old wineskins to split and break and spill the wine everywhere.

Likewise, if we fail to update our systems – and by systems here I mean if we fail to leave aside our prejudices and long held dogma... if we fail to continually experience and embrace God's sanctifying grace as a congregation, anything new we do will cause the old wineskin to break, and we will remain irrelevant.

Now that's a harsh word... because I have just suggested that perhaps Nameoki UMC is irrelevant to our current surroundings and society.

A data projector, a youth group, new carpet, cushioned pews, a blended service, and a freshly installed organ have not made Nameoki UMC relevant. Just different to one of the other irrelevant churches a few doors down from here.

To BE relevant is not the once off purchase of a new piece of equipment. To be relevant is not installing a data projector. To be relevant has nothing to do with how nice our sanctuary is or what a great childrens programme we have.

We will only walk the road of relevancy if we take the old old story – the unchanging story of Jesus Christ – and begin to preach it to the world. For anyone hearing the true message of Jesus Christ cannot – will not – deny that Jesus is still relevant today. And anyone seeing the true message of Jesus Christ alive in our lives cannot deny that Jesus is indeed relevant – and so is His church.

The process of making wine really hasn't ever changed – just refined. It's still just a bunch of grapes that have been squished up and fermented. My mom collects wine... there must be 300 or so bottles of wine in different racks around her house. Some of it is worth a lot of money, and some of it not so much. I've always thought that the value of something like wine is more about what that particular wine means to a person.

Like this bottle... this is a 2004 Cabernet Merlot from Annies Lane Vineyard in South Australia – my home state. Now... before you think – what's the world coming too... the pastor just set before us a bottle of wine that he owns, let me explain why this wine is important to me.

My son Sam... whom most of you know died in an accident a few years ago is buried with his maternal grandmother in a small isolated cemetery in the Clare Valley, 70 miles north of the Australian city of Adelaide in a region known around the world for its wine. On all 4 sides of this little country cemetery, with graves dating back to the creation of the state in the early 1800's, are the grapevines of Annies Lane Winery. So now you know why this particular wine is so special to me.

When Annie's Lane Winery harvests the grapes and makes wine, it is creating a product that will never be replicated again. The 2007 Cabernet Merlot tastes different to this bottle of Cabernet Merlot that was produced in 2006. Every new season brings with it a new crop of grapes that are slightly different. Some grapes have a little more sugar, some grapes are smaller or larger than the previous year due to the soil conditions and the amount of rainfall.

Which means that the winery must tweak their fermenting process every year in order for it to be successful. It can never use the same process as last year, and won't use the exact same process next year to create the new seasons wine.

When we in the church try and recreate, year after year after year, the exact same thing we did last year, or the year before that, we are living into Jesus parable.

Don't use old wineskins to hold new wine. The new wine will ferment differently... and every new season requires a new process. If we put new wine into old wineskins, the old wineskins will burst and everything will run down the drain.

The basic understanding of how a grape ferments and creates wine doesn't change... but the time it takes for a grape to ferment and the different tastes the grapes give changes every year with every new crop.

So how does this apply to the church... and to us. The message of Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. But... the flavor with which it is presented and lived is always changing.

You see, we are called to daily allow the presence of God in, around and through our lives to continually update the system of our church and the system of ourselves, so that we can hold the new wine that God is making in the new wineskin God is creating, and wants to create out of our old buildings and congregations and ourselves.

But in doing so, some of us will be required to change – our attitudes, our prejudices, our lives even – so that the message of United Methodism, but more importantly the Gospel of Jesus Christ, can be more boldly, more visibly and more effectively preached to the world.

Here's that quote from Wesley again...

*I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out."*

And that is not an irrelevant message. That is good news!

Take a look at your life for a moment.

What do you see.

Are you an old wineskin. We've always done it that way. It'll never work. Bring back the old Hymnal. Why can't we just use the organ every week. My grandfather donated the communion table in this church and therefore I own it. Kids are welcome, as long as they keep quiet and don't run up and down the aisles. Teenagers should cut their hair and wear longer skirts.

Church exists to serve me. We should just sing new songs and throw out the hymnals. Old people don't belong in the church, they just keep getting in the way. The volume should be quieter, louder, quieter, louder, quieter, louder...

To be honest – we're all old wineskins, and deep down we know it.

We've held on to our traditions, our customs, our dogma, our prejudices, and our selfishness – and we've painted it all onto the face of God.

If we like the United Methodist hymnal – God must equally like the United Methodist hymnal.

If we think kids should be seen and not heard. God thinks that kids should be seen and not heard.

If we think we should throw all the old hymns in the trash, God thinks we should throw all the old hymns in the trash.

If we think that a lay speaker must always wear a tie and the preacher should wear a robe, God thinks that no-one can preach not wearing a tie or a robe.

Friends, we are called to be daily transformed by the renewing of our minds. That means allowing ourselves to be transformed by God's Holy Spirit into new wineskins this very day, ready for new service.

All of us are old wineskins... even the youngest of us carry attitudes and prejudices against a changing church landscape that casts us as old wineskins.

Perhaps it's our attitude towards teenagers... contemporary music... hymns...

Perhaps you have long held a belief that you are better than other people because you have more money... more prestige... live higher on the social ladder... have attended the same church for longer than anyone else...

This morning... in the meal of communion... I'm inviting you to leave some of your old wineskins at the altar as you come for communion. To ask for God to pour into you the new wine of his Holy Spirit...

Real revival, real growth only begins when we humble ourselves and pray. And by humble ourselves, I take that to mean when we let go of the sacred cows in our lives, turning them over to God... and allowing him to pioneer within each of us something new.

You see – it doesn't matter if someone kicks a ball inside this beautiful sanctuary. It's a ball – do you think God loves the ball kicker any less?

It doesn't matter if someone really prefers to sing the old old hymns of faith instead of all the new songs. Do you think God loves the hymn singer any less?

It doesn't matter if a teenager comes walking in with pink hair, a nose ring, 3 tattoos and ripped jeans. God see's right past the hair and the metal – even if you can't, or won't.

In fact – God see's right past your sacred cows too. And he calls you to leave them here – to rid yourself of old wineskins and engage the world in real relationship.

Following communion and our final hymn this morning, there will be the opportunity also for you to pray over here on your right where the cross and the kneeler is against the wall. This is an opportunity for you to pray that God would waken you up to the new and living way he is creating in our church.

Last year at a conference, I sat down between sessions in the narthex of the large church where the conference was being held. And no sooner had I sat down than an older lady sat down beside me, wearing a badge that identified her as an usher. Now, this church is one of those that sees thousands attend on any given weekend. They have loud – and I mean really loud music. Flashing lights. It's quite the experience.

This lady who was in her 80's told me about the time that her church was a small fellowship of 100 or so people. She then went on to wistfully remember how much more she enjoyed it in those days with an organ and traditional hymns. She told me that the music these days was a bit loud... that the people didn't dress like they used to... and that she didn't really 'enjoy' the church service.

But then she said... but... look at all the thousands of people who have come to this place who have met Jesus. This... she said proudly... is my church. And I wouldn't go anywhere else.

Real revival begins with the heart felt acknowledgement that God is already here – Immanuel, God with us – and he calls us to join him in his mission and ministry, not us calling God to come and be a part of what we are doing.

Methodism Schmethodism. Though we may be called United Methodist's here in Granite City, may we be called relevant followers of Jesus first and foremost. Amen.