

The Replacement

Luke 5:27-39

Cradock Presbyterian Church

February 24, 2013

I think most of you remember the late 60s and early 70s pretty well; some of you, like me, grew up during that era. Do you remember how good it was to have a pair of old, really worn, really faded blue jeans? The older the better; and patches were a badge of honor. I think that's because it was a way of showing – what? Devotion to something, I guess, or maybe your individualism. I know my own peer groups were definitely into the old jeans. If you bought a new pair, you needed to fade those things fast, or somebody might regard you as some kind of subversive.

You always wore those faded, worn jeans anytime you went to a social gathering. You knew you'd "fit in" with your peers, and be non-threatening. Heaven forbid that you showed up at a party or some other peer-oriented event with nice clothes and a tie! *Suits* were out of the question! You would be sneered at worse than if you had brand-new jeans! Even today, except maybe for some private schools, wearing a suit and tie to school was (and probably still is) a good way to get a bloody nose, or a black eye. People don't like you if you're too different, and especially if you look like you're "higher class" – or trying to be.

So people hung onto those old jeans forever, longer than they were really useful. I mean, the point to clothes is to cover you, right? I saw many folks catching fresh air from their jeans! When you got wiser as you got older, you began to realize that maybe you needed to replace those jeans, or any jeans, when they were no longer fit to wear.

So you did. The old worn-out jeans had served their purpose, had passed their usefulness, and it was time to replace them with something more appropriate.

Today's scripture tells a story that's a lot like those jeans. First, a guy shows up wearing a *suit*, more or less. He ain't from our group! Then Jesus begins talking about the uselessness of hanging onto something for far too long, for all the wrong reasons. We can learn much from Jesus on this score.

This first story sets up easy in my mind. I can imagine a bunch of people sitting around a table. Some of 'em are wearing blue jeans, really "hole-y" blue jeans, and I don't mean *sacred*. Lots of patches! And they're all sitting together in their little group, with the guys and gals having the most-worn jeans sitting in the places of honor. But the rest of this gathering consists of some of the outcasts, the ones who won't even wear jeans; they wear *suits*. They can't even sit amongst the jeans people, because those folks are packed in tight, no room for outsiders. They wouldn't want any outsiders, anyway, and especially not those guys in *suits*.

Oh, those suits guys knew the score. Being a suit-wearer, they knew, was always going to get them sneered at and excluded. NONE of the jeans people would ever dare to break ranks and invite them in.

So it took someone whose power transcended clothing to usher in the change. It was a replacement of sorts. Levi never knew acceptance, never was included, because of being a tax-collector – the ultimate in suit-wearing. He was filled with despair, and maybe even hopelessness. In one simple phrase, "Follow me," Jesus replaced despair and hopelessness with joy and hope. When I think of the despair, and hopelessness,

and even *fear*, that characterize a lot of life nowadays, I sometimes remember this story, and how Jesus replaced those things with his simple call, "Follow me."

Some people refuse to let go of the comfort they'd always had, though, with the way things had always been. That's the Pharisees and scribes, who didn't like these suit-wearers sitting at table with *them*, the good guys, the jeans-wearers. Heaven forbid, we might get talked into wearing *dress slacks!* Jesus was dealing with people who couldn't see how things really were. The Judaism of his time made it impossible to believe you would surely go to heaven, go to an eternal life with God. There were too many restrictions on the kind of jeans you could and couldn't wear! But they thought that's how it should be. This business of starting new, well that just can't happen!

That's where we find ourselves today – "we" being you and I and all of our brothers and sisters right here in this church. We're comfortable in our worn old jeans! – even if they're so threadbare, we better not wear 'em out in public, we might get arrested for indecency. IN NO WAY do we want to go to wearing a *suit*. It's just not who we are. If you think that's how it *should* be, let me ask you something. Who were the people of the early church, for the most part? They were those jeans-wearing people, people just like the ones around that table in Levi's house. If you read the Acts account of Pentecost, what does it say? All those people were gathered around *for the Jewish festival day*. All of those converts, or almost all of them, were jeans-wearing Jews. They changed, because of Jesus. So if they could change, can't we? They could see that the jeans were worn out, and that God had given them a new suit, a suit of grace and forgiveness and eternity. Can we learn anything from that?

In fact, there's more to this section of Scripture than that. There is a little episode where Jesus comments on the Pharisees' complaints about his disciples not fasting. His take on it is that you need to live appropriately, that since he's still here his disciples ought to celebrate; there will come a time for them to fast and pray. When you are part of a wedding, you have a role to play. You're either a bride or a groom, a member of the groomsmen or the bridesmaids, or witnesses. You make sure on that day you do what the day requires. So what is it that Jesus is requiring? He tells us by using two homely examples. One is the inspiration for the theme of this sermon: sewing a new, unshrunk cloth patch on an old, many-times-washed-and-worn garment. Think blue jeans! You know as well as I do that if you put some nice, new, dark blue denim over a hole in your old faded jeans, the thing will pucker up, and pull on the stitches that sew it on. Eventually, it'll look terrible. And it might even pull loose. You either need another way to close the hole or you need to consider whether to replace those jeans.

But my favorite is the parable here of the wineskins. You used a wineskin *once*. The fermentation process greatly stretched and weakened the skin, usually skin from a large farm animal like a cow or an ox, shaped into a bladder-like thing. When the wine was ready, it'd get poured out into stoneware and served. The wineskin had done its job. If you put new grape juice into it and tried to start over, the process of fermentation would surely cause the weakened wineskin to burst, and you lose all that new wine you put in.

It's like that in the church, too. Some of the things we hold onto are like a wineskin. We remember how good that old wine was! We want to make some more just

like it. So we hold onto that old wineskin, with the idea that we can make some more wine just like the old wine. It doesn't work that way. I think when you're talking about the modern church, the new grapes, the new juice, is the new people who come into our midst. You know, suit-wearers! *The old wineskin won't hold them.* It'll burst, and just make a mess of things. The old wineskin is the "way we've always done it," the things that always worked before. Those things did their job; now it's time to fashion a new wineskin out of the raw materials God has given us to work with. Our role, just as the role of the people at that wedding, is to fashion those new wineskins. You know what those raw materials are? A very good group of people, very loving, very devoted; and a Holy Spirit that teaches us, guides us, walks with us, as we do the work. You know that next Sunday is a big day in the life of our church, when we gather after church, and sit around table, and talk about jeans and suits and wineskins, new and old. We need you to come, however you're dressed, ready to sit at table and listen for the voice of our Lord; because he'll speak to us, through us. Nothing is more important; nothing could be more worthwhile. Nothing can replace the power and love of God in our midst, no matter how you dress it up.