

Mark 2:13-22

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

ARE WE HAVING FUN YET? Dan McCoig | 10 January 2010

1.

Today's lesson is very, very busy.

Jesus teaches.

Jesus calls an early disciple.

Jesus is accused of associating with the wrong crowd.

Jesus answers some of his critics and teaches some more.

2.

Mark is a gifted storyteller.

He is sparser with detail than the other gospel writers, but when he provides it we should pay attention.

For example, in the previous chapter Mark presents Jesus teaching in the synagogues of Galilee.

In chapter two, Jesus is now teaching by the lake.

In other words, Mark is alerting us to two pieces of information.

One, Jesus has become so popular that the number of people who are gathering to listen to what he has to say and to see what he may do simply will no longer fit into the synagogue.

Jesus, by necessity, has to resort to open-air teaching and healing.

And two, he is on the outs with the religious authorities who are responsible for the synagogues.

He is no longer as welcome as he once was.

Both of these pieces of information are recurring themes in Mark.

3.

Let's walk through our lesson.

I have not done a purely expository sermon in a while, that is walking through the scripture text and talking about its meaning and significance.

After Mark sets the stage – by the lake – he narrates for us Jesus' call of Levi.

In the other gospels Levi is called Matthew.

Matthew is one of the original disciples and appears in all four gospels.

What is central to Levi is where he was and what he was doing.

He was sitting at a tax booth collecting taxes.

Judea was a conquered and occupied land.

The conquerors, the Romans, compelled the conquered to pay tribute to the emperor.

Taxation was one way of paying for the occupation.

It was also a way of making sure everyone knew who was boss.

The most common form of direct taxation in the ancient world was taxes on agricultural produce. Another form of taxation was confiscation of lands, which in turn would be leased by the emperor to wealthy persons and sharecropped by poor persons.

This arrangement is the backdrop of a lot of Jesus' social justice teachings in the gospels.

The way in which a person became a tax collector deserves attention.

Think political patronage in Huey Long's Louisiana, Boss Tweed's Tammany Hall in New York, or Richard Daley's Chicago.

Then think, worse.

Ordinarily, tax collection was awarded to the highest bidder.

In order to recoup the amount of money you spent to gain the job of tax collector, you would overtax your neighbors, send the required amount on to your superiors and keep the rest for yourself.

Amounts in the neighborhood of 10, 15, and 25 percent over and above the actual tax were not out of the ordinary.

As you can imagine, tax collectors had very few friends and even less admirers.

And, they had a lot of enemies.

Tax collectors were villains.

Good people didn't associate with them.

Decent people didn't associate with them.

And devoutly religious people absolutely didn't associate with them.

Two highly scandalous things are happening at this point in the story.

One, why in the world would Jesus jeopardize his movement and involve someone like Matthew.

And two, everyone knows that people don't change.

Once an avaricious tax collector, always an avaricious tax collector.

Right?

Still, Jesus calls and Matthew answers.

Jesus says, "Follow me."

Mark reports, "And he got up and followed him."

Earlier I commented about how little detail Mark's give his reader.

This is a prime example.

If I were Mark's editor, I would want him to fill in everything that had happened in Matthew's life up to the point where gets up and follows Jesus without any apparent hesitation at all.

There is certainly a lot of back story there.

Had Matthew been having second thoughts about his chosen career path?

Was he tired of being ostracized as unclean by his own people?

Had he been dreaming of spending his days in other ways?

Granted, lining his pockets was not all bad.

His living was as good if not better than most.

But how he came by it must have been taking a toll of sorts.

I wonder if he had developed ulcers.

Maybe he was being beset by stress headaches.

Perhaps he had not had a decent night's sleep in a long time.

If Marley's ghost haunted and warned Scrooge to change his miserly ways, what ghosts were haunting and warning Matthew?

Set all of this along side the probability that Matthew had begun to hear a thing or two about Jesus – the healings, the exorcisms, snippets of sermons that he had preached in this synagogue or that synagogue.

Matthew could have heard that not only was Jesus capable of healing diseases and casting out demons and enlightening the ignorant, but that he was also changing lives as well.

Matthew could have heard that Jesus was taking on disciples and that among the very first were humble fishermen of all people.

Jesus wasn't even interviewing people like the scribes and the Pharisees for the position of disciple.

Maybe, just maybe, Jesus could find it in his heart to give a tax collector a chance, to liberate Matthew from his life's burdensome path.

4.

Well, we know what happened.

Jesus did give a tax collector a chance and in doing so made himself about as popular as a tax collector himself.

The ruling and learned elites, the scribes and the Pharisees, criticize Jesus' call of Matthew immediately.

Why, they want to know, does Jesus associate with persons he clearly and plainly should have nothing do with at all?

People like Matthew had long ago damned themselves.

There was no hope for them.

They were beyond redemption.

They should and were, with religious sanction, treated contemptuously, dehumanized even.

The scribes don't say this directly to Jesus.

The best critics seldom engage in direct communication when indirect communication is so much more effective.

All the same, Jesus hears them and responds with a proverb:

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

And to the proverb Jesus adds a description of his mission: "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Over the decades, indeed over the centuries, the gospels have been read dualistically.

Critics have seen in the gospels a word for the poor and against the rich, a word for the Gentiles and against the Jews, and word for the community and against the individual, a word for the world's outsiders and against the world's insiders, and so on.

Many of the 20th century's Marxist revolutions attempted to appropriate Jesus as one of their own.

I can recall a lecture given by one of my professors, John Leith, who remarked that he saw in the gospels an even more fundamental dualism.

He said it was *the* dualism.

Namely, there are two types of people in the gospels.

One, there are those who believe that they are all that they will ever need to be and therefore need little or nothing from anyone or anything, including God.

And two, there are those who believe that there is much more they need to be and can be and that their lives are interdependent with the lives of others, including and especially God's.

In other words, there are the righteous who see themselves as self-sufficient and adequate.

And, there are the sinners who know themselves to be flawed and in need of redemption beyond themselves.

Jesus knew that he could do something for the sinners.

He also knew that he could do nothing for the righteous.

5.

Now, the final verses of our lesson.

Evidently, people had begun to notice that John's disciples as well as the Pharisees, some of Palestine's most devout and influential Jews, and Jesus' disciples practiced their religion quite differently from one another.

John's disciples and the Pharisees, they fasted.

Jesus' disciples did not.

Why?

Jesus' answer is intriguing.

He provides three illustrations.

One, everyone knows that it is quite rude to fast at a wedding banquet, especially when the bridegroom is present.

The disciples are eating and drinking and making merry as if they were at a wedding banquet because Jesus, their bridegroom, is among them.

There will come a time when he will not be with them and fasting will be appropriate, but that day was not upon them.

Two, any good tailor knows that new cloth is never sown onto an old garment.

You wash the garment and the new cloth shrinks and will tear the old cloth.

Three, any good vintner knows that new wine is never put into old wineskins.

Old wineskins lack elasticity.

As the wine ferments, expanding gases will burst the skins.

The skins are ruined and the wine is lost.

Jesus uses these illustrations to tell us that new situations demand new rituals, that the old cannot contain the new.

Jesus is the new.

I am in my fifth decade of life.

I have a married daughter and a college-aged son.

The nest is emptying.

The last year has been filled with one new and unfamiliar episode after another.

Meaning, it hasn't been all that different from all of the rest of life.

Nothing living is static.

Everything living moves, evolves, changes.

Lesslie Newbigin, Scottish missionary to India, was appointed bishop, an interesting vocational turn of events for a Presbyterian minister, in the fledgling Church of South India, which emerged in the 1940s.

The Church of South India was an ecumenical church formed from several Protestant churches.

In the early going, when everything was being decided and the new church's course set, a frequent question was asked, "Well, if we do that, just where are we going?"

Newbigin reports that eventually someone, he doesn't recall, answered: "The Christian has no right to ask where he is going."

Matthew didn't ask.

Abraham didn't ask.

Jacob didn't ask.

In other words, following Jesus, moving forward, involves a huge element of trust.

Following Jesus involves adventure and if we are in the right frame of mind, adventure is fun.

Amen.