

The Unconventional Ministry of Jesus

Mark 2: 13-17

This Jesus, he was hard to pin down, figure out, put a label on. His ministry was a bit unconventional, *no, a lot* unconventional! He called as a disciple a tax-collector, who by occupation would have been considered a cheat and a traitor.

And he would eat and drink with anybody, *anybody*? His dinner fellowship was a moral and social scandal, because he didn't ask the sinners or tax-collectors at the table to repent or join the church, or sign a purity pledge before he could enjoy a meal with them. Doesn't Jesus have any standards? He passed up the Ruth's Chris Steak House business men's lunch and went to the honky-tonk.

The only thing Jesus required to enter the kingdom of heaven was a readiness to change, but who's ready to change until they worry about what they've become, or see something so beautiful, good or true that it makes them want to change?

In the 1800's John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, followed Jesus by taking the Eucharist into the streets and serving it to anybody because, he said the Eucharist was a "converting sacrament". Grace can flow anywhere, bringing transformation in its wings.

I

So let's look at Jesus' call to Levi, or Matthew, to be one of his disciples.

Jesus had already called two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John, by the seashore to follow him. They were fishermen, among the blue-collar workers of their day.

So Jesus didn't begin his disciple hunt with the VIPs. He called this tax-collector, who was not a VIP, a Very Important Person, but a VHP, a Very Hated Person. You may have heard why tax-collectors were so despised: tax-collectors could gouge all the taxes they could out of people, beyond what the tax laws prescribed, and pocket the extra cash. So, they were considered cheats. They worked for the Roman oppressor and so were traitors. Collaborators!

But here Jesus was, walking along, when he passed Levi at his tax-collection booth. He up and called Levi to follow him as one of his circle of disciples. And Levi, Mark records, didn't waste time thinking about it. He said yes, and up and followed Jesus.

Was that the first time he'd seen Jesus up close? Had he been following what Jesus was doing? Had what Jesus was doing and saying caused his heart to leap in hope? Had he come to hate what he was becoming in his job and long for

a way out? We can only ask the questions, but every important decision we ever make has “the urgency of now” attached to it, to use President Obama’s phrase.

II

Then Jesus took his disciples along to his new disciple Levi’s house for dinner. Eyebrows were no doubt raised. There were a number of other tax-collectors and those called “sinners” at the dinner party. The designation of “sinner” described a wide range of people. Some were no longer living under the Law of Moses for a number of reasons. Some had failed spectacularly, and their sins were so public that they were shunned. Others were so poor that their poverty kept them from following all the commands. I’ve known people who would not come to church because they could not afford to dress well enough.

Some were the sex-workers of their day whose occupation made them unclean and among the “sinners”. Others were considered sinners because they were sick, or maimed, or deformed and excluded from the temple by their afflictions.

But Jesus said the kingdom of God was also the kingdom of the sick, the poor, the shamed, those who knew their need for God.

III

So in our text, the scribes and Pharisees, the scriptural literalists and morality managers of their day, came to Jesus' disciples and said with a hint of disgust in their voices: "Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?"

And then Jesus delivers a zinger. He began by quoting a well-known proverb. That was one of his favorite teaching techniques: he would draw his listeners in with a familiar proverb, parable or story, and then as they nodded, he'd pull the spiritual rug out from under them, turn their conventional world upside down.

So he began with the proverb: "Those who are well need no physician." Yep, head's nod. Then he added the zinger: "I have come to call not the righteous but the sinners." I've not come to make the righteous more righteous, the respectable more respectable, but to call sinners, the least and last and lost to *life!*

He was not saying that the righteous, respectable, the conventional were bad; they can serve the kingdom too. He was saying my highest calling is to these others.

IV

So how do we follow our unconventional Lord today, as a church and as individuals? What I think Jesus shows us and inspires in us is the courage to love,

love especially those who the culture call less lovable, “lesser”, those sometimes feared, despised, shunned.

What I love about Grace is not its physical address, 719 Club Drive, Statesville, NC, but its spiritual address: At the corner of Love and Courage!

We all have our prejudices. They are slippery things. We are like Whack-a-Mole with prejudices popping up all over the place. We whack them down as much as we can. And to change metaphors, we try to pull them up by their roots, which are mostly our fears and insecurities.

The expression goes, “You are what you eat.” Society says, “You are *with whom* you eat.” And Jesus says, “exactly”, then turned it upside down. A church is truly a church when it invites all people to the table. It can make people nervous, this full welcome of all. Sometimes it can make *us* a little nervous. But nervousness can be a sign that bravery is on the way. A church’s love and mission should startle people sometimes, make them think, or re-think.

It has to do with our mission and outreach too, this calling. As Jesus did, we go out to the hungry and hurting, the hated and the overlooked. We go out and bring them help and hope. We become their public advocates.

Helen Barnette, a brilliant Louisville high-school teacher, wrote a book about helping children in public education. One chapter was on her conviction: “every child needs an advocate”. All children do, even the child in us, all of us.

V

And finally to our Old Testament text, the passage from Isaiah that we read together as our Call to Gathering. It is God’s vision for the transformation of life, the Kingdom of God as a feast for all the world. It is echoed in the Book of Revelation, but it is not just for the world to come.

On this mountain the Lord will make for all people (all, not some) a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines (Don’t tell the Baptists), of rich food, filled with marrow, of well-aged wines well refined.

Is your mouth beginning to water?

And the Lord will on this mount destroy (remove) the shroud that is drawn over the faces of all people, the covering that is spread over all the nations. God will swallow up death forever. My Lord God will wipe the tears away from all faces.

Isaiah is talking about death and sorrow, and death not just as the ending of a life, but death as a pall over our lives, and a power over our lives, a spirit of death.

Now the stunning conclusion:

And God will take away our disgrace from all the earth.

Jesus comes to rid us of shame and remove our disgrace. He did then, he does now. Shame is a killer of the spiritual life. It attacks us at the level of our personhood. It says not, “You made a mistake”, but “You are a mistake”, not “You did something wrong”, but “Something is wrong with you”.

But Jesus lifts us up, wipes our faces clean, and sends us into the world as his people of courageous love.

As the Iona hymn goes:

Will you love the “you” you hide

if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside

and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you’ve found

to reshape the world around

through my sight and touch and sound

in you and you in me?

And we answer with the early American hymn:

I will arise and go to Jesus

he will embrace me in his arms;

in the arms of my dear Savior
O there are ten thousand charms.

Amen