

“Feasting”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 21, 2024

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 107:-19

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 2:13-17

Introduction

The story of Jesus in Mark’s gospel moves quickly. From his baptism in the Jordan by John to the temptation in the wilderness, the calling of his first disciples to casting out unclean spirits, healing the sick, and cleansing a leper. All of this happens in the first chapter. Chapter two begins with the memorable healing of the paralytic man who had to be lowered by his four friends – through a hole cut in the roof – into the crowded house where Jesus was teaching.

“When Jesus saw their faith,” Mark tells us, “He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” (2:5) We are told nothing about the faith of the paralyzed man; Jesus responds to the determination of the man’s friends. And he does not begin with physical healing but pronounces, first, that the man’s sins have been forgiven.

And yet, some are apparently troubled that Jesus declares the man forgiven without him going through the proper channels, such as visiting the priests and offering the appropriate sacrifices. Jesus simply declares him forgiven, and healed, telling him, “Stand up, and take your mat and go to your home.”

Read Mark 2:13-17

I like food. I like to grow, prepare, and eat it. I love feasts, even movies about feasts. Some of you may remember the care and indulgence that goes into the meal in *Babette’s Feast*. But my favorite feast movie is *Big Night*, the story of two Italian immigrants – Chef Primo and his brother Secondo – who try to save their restaurant in 1950’s Paradise, New Jersey with one amazing meal – made with all the freshest and finest ingredients – to impress musician Louis Prima. The final dish of the big night is a timbale, which means deep dish; an everything-but-the- kitchen-sink pasta entrée enclosed in a baked-to-a-perfect-brown pastry

dough. I won't give away what happens in the end of the movie, but the feast is absolutely five-stars.

Here we find Jesus sitting – literally reclining, like at his Last Supper – and feasting at the home of Levi. As with the calling of the first disciples that Amber described last week, Jesus sees and knows this tax collector and invites him saying, “follow me.” Levi responds by inviting Jesus to a meal.

The list of dinner guests at Levi's house includes Jesus and his disciples, other tax collectors and sinners. The term “sinners” in the gospels generally refers to those who show blatant disregard for God's law. Tax collectors were considered among the most notorious sinners and were particularly despised in Israel for collaborating with Roman occupiers who placed a heavy tax burden on the people. They were known to be greedy and, because they dealt with Gentiles and gentile money, were considered unclean.

Observing this dinner were the “scribes of the Pharisees” who keep a wary eye on Jesus. This meal in which Jesus is partaking is certainly not kosher; and – maybe more importantly – they wonder why he would associate with people who do so much harm to the community.

So the scribes ask the disciples of Jesus – not Jesus directly – “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus overhears them and responds with a proverb, saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;” and then a statement of purpose: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Based on Jesus' analogy, the sinner is a patient in need of healing because their situation is dire, while the righteous are those who already keep the Torah and therefore are in good health.¹ Jesus sees sin as disease and himself as a physician with the skill to heal it.

Thus, at issue is how one should be judged by the company one keeps; and how Jesus distinguishes between the righteous and sinners.

The boundaries the Law prescribed between sin and righteousness, clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, sacred and profane – these could not, in the eyes of the scribes and Pharisees, be broached without profound damage to social and

¹ Rodney Caruthers from *WorkingPreacher.com*

religious order. Occupied, as they were, by the Romans, retaining distinct boundaries within Judaism was paramount.

What is new about Jesus is not so much what he is saying – his elevation of concern for human need over ritual of observance is a part of Israel’s tradition. But there’s no denying that Jesus’ words and actions pose a threat to that established order of things; he transgresses and subverts these well-established boundaries almost from the start.

Jesus begins his ministry in Mark with the proclamation that, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near.” (1:14) In this new age, human need – for wholeness, for acceptance, for sustenance, for healing – is more fundamental to God’s will for humanity than maintaining the present – soon to be old – order.

While the scribes and Pharisees remain focused on separating themselves from sinners and keeping themselves ritually pure, Jesus sits at table with the tax collectors and shatters the boundaries between clean and unclean, pure and impure, righteous and sinner. And he does this not to be disruptive, but because this is the way – not just the best way, but the only way – to heal the sick and bring back the lost.

Thus, Amy-Jill Levine posits that Jesus is not only a physician for the spiritually sick – those afflicted with gluttony, selfishness, or sanctimoniousness – but one who is willing to make house calls. “Rather than use social shame to treat such behaviors of habits,” she surmises, “it might be better to think about treating diseases. Greed prompts more greed, so what can be done to break the system? Desire for power prompts the desire for more power, so what can be done to stop the drive? Bringing sinners to repentance is more likely to occur with care,” Levine says, “than with condemnation.”²

Boundaries can sometimes be just as difficult for us to cross. While we may not share the same concern about a kosher diet or unclean currency, many of us are taught to be wary about being judged according to the company we keep. Parents tell their children to stay clear of “those” people, and most of us learn early on who “they” are.

It is no wonder, then, that Mark shows us Jesus making house calls by eating and drinking with sinners. Breaking bread with people indicates the commonality

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: a Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*, p. 15

of relationship; for each of us need food to live. Even more, eating and drinking reminds us of the promised eschatological banquet in which, Isaiah says, “The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food and well-aged wines.” (25:6)

While we worship here today, some of our congregation are downtown at North Church to worship with those who we were taught to understand as “those” people. Yesterday, we made a meal that we hope will be nothing less than a feast – to nourish our friends at North Church in both body and spirit. As, in a short while, we will sit at our tables in our Fellowship Hall, they will be serving, eating and drinking with folks; many of whom have been homeless, addicted, or incarcerated. And while differences in race, wealth and health do not magically melt away, the opportunity for relationship and understanding grows. Though the existing divides of our social order are not instantly bridged, that which we have in common – that we are all God’s beloved children – is laid on the table.

Thus, when we cross over boundaries to share tables and forge relationships, we are given this foretaste of the Kingdom – the *kin-dom* of God – that is to come. And what begins at these tables is broadened into other aspects of our lives: how we choose to spend our time and resources, how we talk and think about and welcome strangers and new residents into our communities, what policies we support and to whom we lend our vote.

From the very beginning, Jesus’ ministry shatters boundaries. He eats with the unclean, heals on the Sabbath, touches lepers, and even claims divine authority to forgive sins. God’s inbreaking of this world in Jesus is resisted by those who hold power; whose lives are dedicated to keeping boundaries intact. And yet, for a leper who is cleansed, for the paralytic man who is healed, for the sinner who is forgiven and welcomed to the table, God’s coming is welcomed as a mission of liberation, healing, and life.³

Jesus, the good physician, has come for those who are sick; even when it requires him to make house-calls, even if – maybe especially if – it requires crossing over boundaries. Yes, he eats with tax collectors and sinners, because to sit at table and feast together may be the best way – or, at least, the first way – to show someone you consider them to be a fellow child of God. Amen.

³ Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*