

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Associating with the wrong types of people"

Scripture: Mark 2:13-17, Psalm 146

Opening Hymn: Come sing, O church, in joy! 757

Closing Hymn: Christ for the world we sing 772 tune: Moscow

Children's Hymn: We are marching (with Xhosa lyrics) 639

Choruses: Days of Elijah

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January 26, 2020

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany

Imagine with me...

A new friend has invited you to a party
And you are each driving there separately.

Just after you pull up to the destination
You get a text that your friend is running late.
She tells you to go in without her.

She's already texted the host that you're coming
and promises a warm welcome.

So it seems you have a choice before you.

Will you wait outside in the freezing cold,
For your friend to accompany you?
Or will you venture into the house alone?

Being that you're a little underdressed for the weather
You head towards the house
And ring the doorbell.

The door swings open
And you are ushered in.

The host is warm and gracious.
After taking your coat
And handing you a drink
He starts introducing you to the different people
Who are gathered in his home.

Everyone is incredibly friendly.

Soon you are jumping in and out of conversations
On your own.

You stumble into one group where people
Are talking about occupations.
When you mention that you work in accounting
The others light up.

One mentions that his accountant has retired
And is looking for someone to handle the business side of his clinic,
An assisted suicide clinic.

Another one has some questions about business write-offs.
She owns a city-wide chain of 'adult' stores
And wants to bring her merchandise onto the web.

You are a little shocked,
And start to stammer...

...When thankfully another person jumps
in to talk about those write-offs.

He did a business degree in finance
And now works for Imperial Tobacco
marketing vaping products.

The man next to him throws in his own thoughts.
And just to prove his opinions are worthwhile
He tells the group that he's got an MBA in finance,
And is an executive with the BC Lottery Corporation.

And just before you thought it could get any stranger...

That executive then introduces his cousin,
An engineer who works with General Dynamics
Who heads the Light Armoured Vehicles development project;
Those LAVs that Canada has been selling to the Saudis.

Your head is spinning.
You're partying with a doctor of death,
An adult store owner who has ambitions to go global,
People who develop weapons,
And work in the gambling and tobacco industries.

"What sort of party is this?" you start to wonder.

Next thing you know you see someone taking photos of the gathering.
She asks your circle to mug for a picture.

You quickly excuse yourself from the group
and leave the house without your coat.

PAUSE

Today we continue our journey through the Gospel of Mark.
It is the shortest Gospel, a mere sixteen chapters.

It's a "Gospel of action
Only one long message of Jesus is recorded...

Mark includes eighteen miracles of Jesus,
about the same number as Matthew or Luke.
[but has only four of Jesus' parables]
compared with eighteen in Matthew
and nineteen in Luke."ⁱ

What you might find interesting about this Gospel is that
"The Messiahship of Jesus is seen...
to be... a carefully guarded secret,
at least until the confession of Peter..."ⁱⁱ

This Messiahship isn't hidden from the reader.
And the demons Jesus encounters keep shouting it out.
But Jesus works hard to keep his identity under wraps.
He doesn't seem interested in letting everyone know
Who he is, at least, not in the beginning.

As we enter today's lesson

People in Jesus' audience would have understood Jesus
To be a teacher and a healer.

Earlier in the Gospel we are told that Jesus was on the speaker's circuit
visiting various synagogues,
the places where people met for religious instruction (Mk 1:29).

We are told that he spoke with authority (Mk 1:22).

And we are told that people were bringing him the sick
And the demon-possessed, to be healed (Mk 1:32).

Jesus would have been regarded by the crowds as a teacher and a healer.

By the second chapter of Mark

Jesus' fame is spreading like wildfire.

People are seeking him out,
And he begins lecturing outside of the Synagogues.

In today's lesson the people find him

While he was out at the lake.

And so, he begins to teach them there.

It is not clear whether he was teaching while walking

Or had finished up his lesson,

But at some point, Jesus encounters a man named Levi
Sitting at a tax collection booth.

Jesus calls Levi to join him.

And just like the calling of Simon & Andrew and James & John,
Levi drops everything and follows.

Now for Jesus to ask Levi to join him

To become one of his disciples,
Is something that would raise
most respectable people's eyebrows.

Levi was a tax-collector.

A tax-collector.

As you'll see later in the passage

The title of tax-collector was often joined with
And modified by the word 'sinner'.

It wasn't so much that Levi or his toll-booth colleagues

Were known to be notorious law-breakers,
Or that they had necessarily neglected any religious obligations,
But that their choice of profession
harmed and degraded society.ⁱⁱⁱ

Tax-collectors were collaborators.

They were despised for "being the instruments
through which the subjection of the Jews
to the Roman emperor was perpetuated.

[Additionally, many] Tax collectors were noted

for imposing more taxes than were required
so that they might more quickly enrich themselves.^{iv}

And so Jesus was breaking cultural taboos by inviting Levi
To become one of his disciples.

But Jesus goes even further
And accepts an invitation to Levi's house.

It seems that Levi was so enthralled with Jesus
He not only invites Jesus over for dinner,
But invites all his friends and associates to meet him.

This boundary-breaking invites questions from the teachers of the law.
After all Jesus had been on a speaker's circuit.
He had been teaching the faithful in the Synagogues.

The teachers of the law ask Jesus' disciples:
"Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"^v

Overhearing them, Jesus responds rather matter-of-factly:
"It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.
I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."^{vi}

Tom Wright notes that "Jesus' answer...
went to the heart of the matter.
He was being obedient to a calling,
and that calling was to be a kind of doctor.

There's no point in the doctor
only keeping company with healthy people.
The doctor must associate with the sick.

Jesus' whole ministry was to bring health,
not just to the physically sick,
but to Israel as a whole and the world as a whole.

[This] would involve upsetting a lot of people
for whom it was more comfortable to label people as 'outcast'
and ignore them from then on."^{vii}

In the second chapter of Mark
Jesus is breaking boundaries.

Now he wasn't breaking boundaries
To teach us that we just need to accept everyone
And everything would be good.
That's today's Gospel not Jesus' gospel.

Jesus was breaking boundaries because he knew
That those people that the church of his day had rejected,
Desperately needed God's healing and forgiveness.

PAUSE

In your bulletins I printed an insert.
The green insert.

The insert talks about the different circles of faithful disciples;
The places where Christians are called to spend our time.

Faithful disciples spend time in the close circle, the church,
The place where Jesus is host.

Faithful disciples spend time in the dotted circle when **we** are the hosts
And where our Christian and non-Christian friends mingle.

Faithful disciples also venture into the half circle
Where we are simply guests,
Where we share God's love with those who will welcome it.

I think that most of our life at St. Andrew's
tends to revolve around the close circle.
We enjoy spending time with each other
In worship and study and prayer.

We also have some experience with the dotted circle.
Sometimes we invite others to join us,
Both here and in the surrounding community.

Just think about our Alpha or the former Reading and Math Camp.

But I'm not so sure we are comfortable with that half-circle,
That is, we aren't so comfortable joining non-Christians
in what they are doing, in places where they are in charge.

Was Jesus comfortable in those places?
You've probably never given it much thought.

We simply assume that Jesus was comfortable
Spending time with 'tax-collectors and sinners'.

Yet from what we know about him from Mark's gospel
Jesus is more like those teachers of the law, those Pharisees
Than the people at the party he attends.

It's quite conceivable that spending the evening at Levi's home
Was both unfamiliar, and uncomfortable.
There was likely some off-color anecdotes.
And the host probably forgot to say grace.

We don't really know if Jesus really enjoyed such places.
But we do know that Jesus believed he had to be there
Just as he had to visit the synagogues.

These people were sick.
These people needed the life he could offer them.

PAUSE

Do you think that the people in our surrounding community,
Who know nothing about church, about Christianity,
who may even be involved in activities that harm society,
need the life that we have?

On the Young Life website,
Under the heading 'What we do'

They note that "staff and volunteers [leave] their adult "comfort zone"
to meet teens on "their turf".^{viii}

Well do you think that maybe not only the para-church,
But the church itself,
also needs to leave its comfort zone
And meet people on “their turf”.

We at St. Andrew’s are Jesus’ presence in this community.
So where are the places we need to be? Amen

ⁱ J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney “tax collector” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 897

ⁱⁱ D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer “Mark: Introduction” *The Eerdmans Bible Commentary* 853

ⁱⁱⁱ See “The Sinner in Luke” in ministrymagazine.org/archive/2010/05/the-sinner-in-luke To [the church fathers], a “sinner” was one who was notoriously wicked. As the centuries passed, rabbinic sources were used more frequently in interpreting the synoptics, and the identification of a “sinner” changed. The common people (*am ha-ares*), who failed to keep the ceremonial laws of the rabbis, were commonly understood to be the “sinner” in the Gospels. Israel Abrahams (1917) followed by Joachim Jeremias (1923) rejected the idea that the *am ha-ares* were the sinners in the Gospels; instead, the “sinner” was one who was dishonest, that is, anyone who followed a suspected and degrading occupation. This, they believed, is reflected in the phrase, “tax collector and sinner”

^{iv} J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney “tax collector” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 1043

^v Mark 2:16 NIV

^{vi} Mark 2:17 NIV

^{vii} N. T. Wright *Mark for Everyone* 21

^{viii} <https://www.younglife.ca/about-us/>