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IMITATORS OF A LIFE

Mark 2:13-22

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Throughout its history, Christianity has struggled to maintain a proper balance between the need for simplicity and a spirit of celebration.

In the early centuries of the faith, heroes devoted to a life of deprivation followed – to the letter – passages such as Matthew 19:21: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” They left civilization to live a life of solitude. Some wore chains around their backs, others lived in the open air. Perhaps the most fantastic was Symeon the Stylite circa 389. For almost forty years he lived on top of a narrow pillar sixty feet high. He performed acts of self-punishment such as touching head to toe 1244 times in a row and he held arms up for hours while crowds worshipped the worms that fell from his body.

But I digress. In our passage this morning, people are complaining about Jesus and his follower’s failure to fast. John’s disciples fasted. The pharisees and their followers fasted. What makes Jesus so special?

There is no doubt that Jesus encourages simplicity. But passages, such as this one, assure us that is not meant to exclude celebration. “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.” Jesus’ retort suggests that the meals he shared with others were occasions of feasting and joy. Apparently, he was not the dour stuffy leader that John the Baptist was.

But the wedding imagery has another layer of meaning beyond celebration. It was an apocalyptic image pointing to the final victory of God over all enemies and the resultant celebration that

followed. Jesus was hinting that something monumental, an earth-altering event, was on the precipice of coming into being. Without revealing his identity, through vivid imagery, Jesus is leading the disciples, the religious authorities, and the crowd to envision Jesus as the key to the redemption of God.

This passage calls to mind a parable of the banquet in Luke 22. As you recall, the Master sets a feast fit for a king, but all those invited are too busy to come – with oxen to tend to and land to care for. The master then instructs his servant,

“Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And the slave said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” Then the master said to the slave, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.”

In fact, this parable was less of a story that Jesus told as it was the way he lived his life. And it is precisely such meals that upset the more polite people of society.

As we have already observed in weeks past, throughout Mark there is this thronging crowd following, chasing Jesus wherever he goes. Mark could have used the Greek word *laos* to describe these followers which simply means “a large group of people,” but instead he uses *ochlos* which indicates a very particular type of crowd.

Korean theologian Ahn Byung-Mu notes that *ochlos* appears thirty-eight times in Mark. Thirty-eight in this short gospel! He explains this word indicates a group of people on the margins of society; those with no power who performed the menial tasks. For example, it referred to the people who followed after the military – cleaning up,

cooking, and serving them. It is akin to the Jewish phrase “*am ha’aretz*” (*people of the land*), which referred to a group of people thought to be unsophisticated, poor, and boorish.

The omnipresent *ochlos* have a special place in Jesus’ heart. Unlike the disciples, they are not castigated for lack of faith, but given his compassion and healing power.

Another related, but different, group referred to as “sinners and tax collectors” were the ones he was feasting with – and that was a problem.

Take Levi (Matthew) for example. We are told he was a toll collector. This position was employed and controlled by Rome. Matthew was working for the enemy! To make matters worse, they were notoriously dishonest, bleeding the people for extra to line their own pockets. They represented the repressive economic order and were shunned by – well – everyone.

“Sinners” were those whose lives failed to conform with the law of God. About this group a rabbinic commentary on Exodus declared, “Let not a man ever associate with a wicked person, not even for the purpose of bringing him near to the Torah.” Such admonitions were extreme and not strictly followed, but they show us sentiments of the time.

The shocking nature of Jesus’ actions resides within his fellowship with this group. According to Markan scholar, Ched Myers, eating with them would have indicated acceptance and an offer of salvation.

As I read this passage I began to wonder, who might we be surprised, shocked, or even offended to find at Jesus’ table. For the attitudes of the pharisees, the Sadducees, and scribes are not unique to that time and place but instead they are endemic to our broken and human nature.

Who are the miserable “Matthews” we have shunned? – the sinners we have judged?

I am virtually certain that when, God willing, you and I find ourselves ready to sit down at the heavenly feast of our Lord, we will see someone across from us, and if only for an instant balk at sitting down. And this is a problem! Because someone else is seeing us sit down and thinking the exact same thing!

Think about the people at Jesus’ table in Mark. It doesn’t say there were preachers or upstanding citizens, but sinners and tax collectors. It means those who have the privilege of sitting with our Lord do so, not because they have clean hands and heart, but those who humble themselves.

Being with Jesus is less about adherence to a doctrine (that was what kept the pharisees from the table, they would have refused to sit down with such a group), but simply a willingness to be where Jesus was.

And this is the point of the new wine and old wineskins. You cannot mix the purity codes and the presence of the bridegroom, the two don’t go together. And Jesus’ new path, was through radical welcome of all willing to sit at table with him.

In the previous passage, we saw Jesus forgive the paralytic, thus eliminating the barriers between us and God. This table, filled with sinners and tax collectors, is the result of such forgiveness. This truly was a brand-new path.

This is the next phase in discovering who Jesus is. He is the one who calls for new rules – which is surprising. For, being the Son of God, the Divine, one would think it would basically be a return to the ancient ways, a recalling and refocusing of what it meant from the beginning to follow and worship God. But no, it requires something new. This means that God is not a static being, but dynamic; not “I am who I am” but “I am becoming who I Am!”

And we, too, need to become.

In his work *Training in Christianity*, Soren Kierkegaard wrote,

Now, it is of course well known that Christ continually uses the expression 'imitators.' He never says that he asks for admirers, adoring admirers, adherents; and when he uses the expression 'follower' he always explains it in such a way that one perceives that 'imitators' is meant by it, that is not adherents of a teaching but imitators of a life...

To be a Christian is to follow Christ. Not just believe, but to follow. And, from this passage, we learn that is not just about doing good deeds but equally about being in fellowship with everyone – especially those whom others have rejected; it does not really matter if it is their own fault or not. In either case, we are to reach out in holy acceptance since God has accepted us.

Imitating Christ may not be easy, but it is clear. Reach out to someone and share a meal. Fill that hole in your life where you connect, on a human level, with someone that others reject.

A few months ago, my mother was at an event in New Jersey put on by, of all people, Bon Jovi. My mom is perhaps the last person in the world to attend a Bon Jovi concert; I think she would choose the Gulag. So, I was shocked when she told me. But my shock turned to admiration when she described the gathering. It was meant to raise funds to help the hungry and those suffering from hunger were in attendance.

But unlike any other similar event you could not tell who was who – who were the hungry and who were the ones with plenty. Everyone came as equals and you simply sat down as fellow human beings, sharing a meal. And, because of this, my mom said the conversation was rich, engaging, personal, and filled with hope.

That is what this table is about. Come, pull up a chair and together let's feast with all whom our Lord loves. Amen.