

Jesus panders to drunken outcasts. That might be the headline from the first part of our Gospel lesson, particularly if he was running for President. In this morning’s reading, we will hear of the calling of an outcast, a banquet with outcasts, a challenge to authority, and a pair of sayings about old and new. All in ten verses. Let’s review what we are about to hear:

Jesus is teaching along the sea, and finds a tax collector named Levi sitting at his booth. He calls Levi to follow him, and he does. It is most likely Levi is a customs tax collector, working for King Herod, who paid for the privilege of imposing a tax on items such as fish and other trade items. Tax collectors were among the most discredited and despised people in society, for they padded the tax due with an amount for themselves. The resentment was even greater when the collector was Jewish, as was Levi, and overcharging other Jews for his own benefit. So, our lesson begins with Jesus calling a man who was a societal outcast.

The scene then switches from “seaside to tableside” [Wilhelm, Dawn, Preaching the Gospel of Mark, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 41] and to increase the scandal of Jesus calling Levi to follow, Jesus and his disciples are now eating at the outcast’s house. It was not uncommon for the doors of a house to be purposely left open, allowing passersby to peek in. On this occasion, the scribes poke in their heads and notice Jesus is eating not just with Levi and his family, but other tax collectors and folks labeled sinners. In their view, Jesus’ purity and righteousness before God were defiled by his eating with those defied religious discipline and ritual.

A third scene has a group of unnamed people asking Jesus why he and his disciples do not fast. While not focusing on this part of our lesson, I would simply point out Jesus’ response may have surprised his own disciples, as he speaks of his being taken away, though not specifically mentioning a crucifixion.

Finally, we have two sayings, one about old and new cloth, and the other about new and old wine and wineskins. Even in an era of preshrunk cloth, and bottled and boxed wine, these images continue to inform the issues of old and new with which the church wrestles today.

Let us hear God’s word to us in Mark 2:13-22:

*<sup>13</sup>Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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?” <sup>17</sup>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.”*

<sup>18</sup>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?" <sup>19</sup>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.<sup>20</sup>The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

<sup>21</sup>"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. <sup>22</sup>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."

Two news items appeared this week that did not involve Donald Trump. The first was the end of John Stewart's hosting of the Daily Show, though in fact I expect there might have been something about Donald Trump in the final show. I never saw a full episode of the program, though at times one of our children would alert us to check a segment online they thought would fit with our humor, sarcasm, or politics. We continue to watch a tamer, evening news program, but I know many receive their news today from non-traditional sources.

The second news item this week was the New York Times reporting it had reached one million online paid subscribers, just a little less than its 1.1 million print edition subscribers. Even if considered a traditional news source, half the people were sourcing it in new ways. Things are changing.

While my baby boomer generation was viewed as making waves not understood by earlier generations, one could simplistically say it was primarily about music, hairstyles, dress; of course, there was that aspect of questioning authority as well. Yet, when it came to receiving information, print, television and radio were what was available. Social contacts came either in person or in something called a letter, or over something called a pay telephone into which college students fed coins. Things have changed is an understatement.

These days there are myriad ways in which information is received, and social contacts made, including the option of being social or receiving information and remaining anonymous. While many may continue to check and read what are considered traditional and trustworthy news sources, there are many other voices claiming to have authority, some of which play upon innocence, ignorance and fear, or feed biases.

We know recruiting for ISIS and other terrorists groups takes place online, often by playing on a young person's feelings of disenfranchisement and under the guise of true faith that calls into question the traditional authority of Islamic teaching and the peaceful views of the vast majority of Muslims. Similarly, a young, white man in this country can go online and link up with voices spouting racial hatred and white superiority, some even under the banner of Christianity as did the Nazis. The result is he will believe he is justified in attending a Bible study at an African American church and then begin shooting.

Such actions leave me emptied. I grieve at the seeming impossibility of stopping not just the perpetrators of such acts of terror and violence, but those who find their worth by initiating and inciting others to hatred. I long for a common understanding of human decency to which all might subscribe. Of course, it exists. It is found in all major faiths and humanist and ethical societies, but it seems it is rejected in favor of personal status or power. I am pretty confident a long term solution will not be found in either a retreat into our own private compounds of security, or a military response that can never destroy all the roots of evil.

While likely not an answer for international terrorism that shuns basic human goodness and traditional values, I believe there is a glimmer of instruction for us in our lesson. Yet, first we face a paradox of our own, for Jesus himself stands in the face of traditional authority, heard in both the accusations of the scribes and the question about the fasting ritual. To their credit, the scribes are seeking to hold together a Jewish identity when the Roman empire was becoming more and more brutal in the persecution of Jews and Christians. The discipline of fasting was in part ritual, but it was also a means by which Jews could find a solidarity and mark their identity with one another.

Jesus not only does not buy into the fast, but also claims to be a new alternative authority. His responses to others would fit within the limits of a 140 character Tweet. Today, he would be seen as creating an underground cell, and in a very real sense, outcast and disenfranchised people would be logging into his Twitter feed, because he was speaking truth for them.

I am fairly certain if I were alive back then, I would be advising Jesus to go slow, try to fit in more, follow the rituals to keep the scribes off his back. Sure, minister to the outcast and sinner, but don't eat with them. I might even say, "Jesus, change takes time." While there is a spark of radical prophet in me, there is also an underlying practicality of not wanting to upset or overturn too much of the status quo.

It is a paradox and challenge to seek hope from Jesus' stand against prevailing tradition and authority as the church today deals with a diminishment of its status and authority in the world. While we might consider our concern as new, we know the decline of strong commitment to and involvement in the church after the heyday of the 1950's and 1960's began when many baby boomers finished high school and never returned to the church, much less raised their children in it. I would propose the words "boring" and "irrelevant" in terms of the church are marking their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, not their 5<sup>th</sup>.

Let's look at some observations and teachings from our Gospel lesson that may be instructive for the church today. First, that Jesus called an outcast to follow him, without conditions, is instructive. Jesus sees value in people who others have deemed hopeless. If we are to be the eyes and voice of Jesus in this day, we are called to set aside our stereotypes of who is good or pure enough to be part of Christ's church.

Jesus went to the outcast Levi's house and ate, not only with him, but with a swarm of other tax collectors and sinners. The tax collectors were despised for good reason. The sins of the others are not named, but it could very well be they are not the big Ten Commandment violations, but simply a refusal or inability to keep temple ritual in terms of prayer, fasting, tithing. Whatever the sin, Jesus eating with them was not kosher.

When accused, Jesus speaks of the righteous not needing a physician, but only the sick. One has to think there was a bit of tongue in cheek sarcasm in suggesting the scribes were righteous, since he knew they were plotting his murder, but let that not block the greater teaching. If we are concerned about outcasts and sinners, if we are concerned with those who incite violence and instill hatred, it takes more than opening our doors on Sunday and putting an “All Sinners Welcome” sign outside. In his biblical commentary on this passage, Lamar Williamson writes, “... Jesus answers a question about eating with a proverb about healing.” Then Williamson proposes, “Relationships are healed when people eat together.” [Williamson, Lamar, Mark, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), pp. 70-71]

That sentence jumped out at me. “Relationships are healed when people eat together.” It speaks to me to what is called the missional nature of the church – not inviting in, but going out. It is what will happen this Friday at the Miracle Kitchen Salvation Army dinner, where folks will serve people it might be thought would not fit into our church or our worship. That is the challenge of Jesus going to and eating with Levi and the others, because for Jesus it is not about them fitting in, but about his church being retrofitted. Jesus said, “*I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*” In Jesus’ church it is sinners who are called to follow, and in Mark’s gospel, there is not even a precondition of it being a call to repentance. But Levi would not have known the call to follow, if Jesus had waited for Levi to come to him.

Finally, since I expect more people in this congregation drink wine than patch their clothes, let’s look at the new and old saying of the wineskins. Wine in biblical times was placed in a sewn bag usually made from a goatskin. When new, the wineskin is elastic and suitable to hold new wine still in the process of fermenting. An old, stiff, stretched out wineskin would break open under the pressure of still fermenting wine.

Jesus does not reject the old wine or the old wineskin. He is simply saying the new and fresh, the spirit-filled and fermenting cannot be placed into the old. Again, it’s not about fitting in.

Jesus was speaking of the old wineskins of ritual and discipline the scribes sought to maintain. Jesus had nothing against fasting, nothing against creating a common bond and unity with others of the faith community. Jesus simply suggested the existing rules themselves excluded some. The disciplines and rules of purity disenfranchised those labeled as outcasts or sinners, who Jesus considered part of his kingdom. These folks were the new wine that would not fit into the old wineskin ways of doing things. If tried, one would have the disaster of not only losing the new wine, but also the old wineskin, and both were important and vital for Jesus.

I don’t know exactly what this means for the church in the coming years, and a part of my not knowing is my chronological age. I am aware of the need for new wineskins. I am also aware there is a language, a style of information gathering, and an understanding of authority for young people in particular that does not fit the church traditions in which I was raised, nor the ways in which I have ministered.

I have glimpsed with younger pastors, who while schooled in traditional theology, also grew up with social media. I firmly feel as relevant as I might seek to be, they are more acutely attuned and able to offer sustenance to so many of their own generation, and perhaps my own as well, who would not think to cross the threshold of a church. For a generation that may binge watch “House of Cards” in a single weekend, rather than at a set time each week, it is no wonder to me worship offered only at a set time and place because of tradition rarely makes the top ten of things to do on a Sunday morning.

The old wine in the old wineskins will not last forever, and even the new wine will eventually become the old, and need to make room for another season of grapes. It is important for old wineskins to celebrate the old, but not impose it on the new. What worked fifty years ago, or dare I say even ten years ago, may have provided spiritual food then, but may be archaic now. Just remember, ten years ago we had never heard of Twitter.

There is new wine fermenting and expanding with life – it cannot be stopped, it cannot be changed. It is the wineskin that must be made new, to welcome the new wine, and it may very well be the wineskin needs to go to the wine, and not expect the wine come to the wineskin.