

(Mark 2:13-22 NRSV)

¹³ Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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?" ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ 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?" ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. ²¹ "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. ²² 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."

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The Company You Keep

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Mark 2:13-22.

Jesus announces a new day. Jesus announces good news, new wine for new wineskins, new cloth for new garments. In Mark Jesus comes on the scene suddenly, and right from the beginning he makes it clear that he is up to something new. And for those who were up to something old, something new made them as nervous as hens in a storm.

The something new that Jesus was up to in this morning's passage was an overturning of a set of social norms. Jesus called Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting right there in his tax booth collecting taxes. Jesus called Levi to be one of his first followers. Only Simon and Andrew, James and John precede Levi as disciples. The first four were fisherman, you know, those who made famous the words, "Follow me and I make you fish for people." But Levi was a tax collector.

Levi worked for the IRS. This time of year, as we count down the weeks before tax day, many of us may feel a twinge of dislike for the IRS. But Levi created a much deeper resentment among Jews of his time. Tax collectors in Judea were despised on a number of grounds. First, they had regular contact with gentiles, and this polluted them in the eyes of the faithful. Second, they collaborated with the Roman authorities, the enemy of occupation. And this uncleanness and willingness to work with the Romans meant they certainly must be dishonest to boot. Polluted, traitorous, and crooked were what the scribes and the Pharisees thought of Levi. And Jesus called him to be a disciple, and then he went and ate with a bunch of others just like him.

There couldn't be any mistake. Maybe Jesus might have been a bad judge of character once, but once he sat with and ate bread with a whole lot of tax collectors, once Jesus willingly touched the bread they touched and put in his mouth on purpose there could be no mistake about his intent. And worse, Jesus not only kept company of the tax collectors, but he never suggested he was doing it so that he could clean them up. Jesus isn't afraid to call a sin a sin. In John, even as he shows her compassion, he tells the woman caught in adultery to go and sin more. But here he calls Levi the tax collector to be his disciple, and quite pointedly Jesus does not say, "Levi, come and be my disciple so you won't be a sinner anymore." He

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does not say, "Levi, come and sin no more." But the scribes and the Pharisees whisper, "Why does he eat with sinners."

Jesus announces a new day, new wine, new cloth. Jesus announces the day when Levi is called good, loyal and honest, when Levi is called a disciple, and when the names that are whispered about him are no longer acceptable in the sight of the Lord.

It takes courage on both Jesus' and Levi's part, for their sharing of bread, their clasping of hands, their working together challenge the most unswerving taboos of their time.

This last Sunday in February is the last Sunday of Black History month, and who can read this passage from Mark and fail to hear the echoes of the American civil rights movement? When I read the words, "Why does he eat with sinners," I see a picture of a drinking fountain marked 'white' and 'black.' And the one marked black is decrepit and rusted and its water comes from the overflow of the clean and shiny one marked 'white.' I see a picture of a wooden sign attached to the side of the building. It says, points the way to the colored bathroom around back, a filthy outhouse, because the gleaming one inside is for white folk. I see a picture of George Wallace barring the door of the University of Alabama. And when the movement began, when blacks and whites began to work together to end the outrage of racial segregation and discrimination, the words were not whispers. The words were shouted, "Why do they eat with the unclean? Don't they know they are sinners, except the word they used was even more vulgar than that."

I find myself reliving pieces of the summer of 1964. I am sitting on a couch in the hot, sultry heat of mid-Louisiana, at my aunt Molly's house, way out in the rural woodlands of Winn Parish. I am sitting on the quilt covered couch in front of a whirring fan, which attempts to move the thick steamy atmosphere. I sit and I stare in disbelief at the flickering black and white TV. Over the days the story unfolds. In the end we know the outline of the truth. Three young freedom fighters in Mississippi were turned over to the Klu Klux Klan, and they were murdered in cold blood. And their white-gowned and hooded killers chanted righteously that they were cleansing the earth of those who would get too close to the colored. And I think of Jesus and Levi in Mark.

I wish I believed that the era of racial prejudice and bigotry were behind us. Surely, things have changed for the better. But the recent police shootings have made it abundantly clear that if you are black, the first instinct is to consider you dangerous. And even more clear, if not more disturbing, is that here in the year 2000 the leading candidate for the presidency of the United States finds it necessary and acceptable to court the vote racism, finds it necessary and acceptable to visit and speak from a university which has an official policy prohibiting inter-

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racial relationships, and finds it necessary and acceptable to say that the flying the colors of slavery from the State House in South Carolina is a matter of local choice.

The pictures are perhaps a little different, but just as vivid from the north. For I remember the ranting prejudice of Louise Day Hicks in her day as head of Boston's school committee and the angry mob scenes of the South Boston bus boycotts. And even today, my black friends tell me when they walk into a store, they are likely to find a security guard or store employee following close behind, not to be helpful, but to be sure they don't steal anything. So even now, even here, the words of the scribes and the Pharisees echo, "They are sinners; they are sinners; they are sinners; don't eat with them; don't associate with them."

It takes courage to announce a new day, to proclaim new cloth for a new garment and new wine for a new wineskin. It takes courage, because the voices of so many, so many upstanding people, the scribes and the Pharisees, it takes courage to announce a new day, because so many voices will want to say that in doing so you are associating with sinners and forsaking your moral integrity.

Jesus knew he was doing just the opposite. Jesus knew he was acting out of his moral integrity.

Jesus was aware that you are known by the company you keep. In the normal course of things, that you are known by the company you keep is issued as a warning. Parents have mouthed those words to their children for generations. Generally they have been seen as a prescription for living a good life. Don't associate with the wrong kind of folk. Don't associate with troublemakers. Don't associate with those who will lead you astray into crime or immorality. And these words have been good advice, good advice. Except, except that too often those stigmatized as the wrong kind of people, as the unclean whose dirt might rub off on you, too often they were good folk who just happened to be different, a different color, a different religion, a different sexual orientation.

And Jesus saw this problem not just as a small thing. He saw it at the heart of his ministry. Jesus was as aware as anyone of the deadening impact of real sin, of real alienation from God. But what he saw, more and more, was a world which had become a photographic negative, a world in which the colors and tones had become reversed and backwards. In an effort to keep the world holy and clean, those whom religion was designed to help – the poor, the outcasts, those who were different from the mainstream – were pointed at in derision. In an effort to keep the world holy and clean, the highest practitioners of religious faith themselves became the most sinful practitioners of bigotry.

If Jesus had any goal in his ministry he had the goal of reversing the photographic negative, the goal of bringing the world into right relation with itself, bringing the world into focus, bringing the colors and tones into their true forms, of

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processing the negative in the darkroom of religious faith and developing a positive print of the world.

Incredibly, as we begin the third millennium of the era that Jesus began, the project still lays before us. Incredibly, Christianity, the faith for whose birth Jesus himself was responsible, is very often the worst offender in getting the world backwards and deriding those whom Jesus would have called as disciples and with whom he would have gladly shared dinner and an embrace.

That fact alone suggests that every religion has the capacity for becoming encrusted and rigid, even when it's centerpiece message is to announce a new day. It is a sad statement about human nature.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus called Levi. He sat and ate and associated with him and others whom many in society had decided were the scum of the earth. And in them and with them he brought into being an exciting movement which proclaimed a new day, new cloth for a new garment, new wine for a new wineskin. In them and with them he brought into being a movement that freed the human heart and the human spirit from the lifeless forms it had known and set it free to be true, soaring, and inspired. In our time the same alternatives face us, and, indeed, we will know the choice we have made by the company we keep. Amen.

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