

“The Questions”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Mark 2:1-22

January 19, 2020 - Beloved Community Sunday

Since we left him, Jesus has been healing and casting out demons and word has begun to spread about this mysterious man who bounds from place to place with strange words and strange disciples following him. Here's what's next, from chapter two of the Gospel according to Mark:

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, [muttering,] questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” And immediately Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he said to the paralytic— “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

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

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?” 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. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

“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. 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.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

I really try hard not to repeat myself from the pulpit, aside from “You are loved” and “Be curious” and “Community is crucial.” But I want to share a story I brought up in my very first sermon as pastor here in August of 2014. It’s from a piece on Public Radio’s “This American Life” that aired way back in 2001.

Writer Jack Hitt tells the story of his four year-old daughter wanting to know what the word “Christmas” meant. The dad did his best to explain about the birth of Jesus – and the girl was intrigued. He bought a children’s Bible, and she was hooked. She wanted to know everything about this Jesus guy. She really liked “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” She thought Jesus was pretty smart.

Then, one day, they drove past a Catholic church with a big ol’ crucifix out front. The little girl asked her dad, “Who’s that?”

They hadn’t quite gotten to that part of the story. So Jack explained how Jesus’s message made the people in power so upset, that they killed him. His dream of love was too much – and so he had to die.

A few weeks after Christmas, Jack Hitt and his daughter were eating lunch at a diner when the girl pointed to a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr in the newspaper Jack had purchased. She asked who the man was, and her dad explained that this man was the reason she didn’t have to go to school today. He explained that this man was a preacher.

“For Jesus?” she asked. Dad said yes, and explained that Dr. King was famous for the message that he brought. He tried to describe it at a 4-year-old level as best he could: “He said that you should treat everybody the same, no matter what they look like.” His daughter thought a minute, then said, “Well, that’s what Jesus said!” And Jack Hitt, relieved that his daughter had understood, said “ Yeah! It is, I guess.”

And then his little girl looked up at him and asked “Did they kill him, too?”

We call this Beloved Community Sunday, and part of the project is to wonder what that means. There are three questions asked about Jesus in this section of Mark and I think they’re helpful in pointing toward the vision that Dr. King and so many other prophets who followed Jesus have had of what life together could be.

The three questions that we hear are:

“Why does this fellow speak in this way?”

“Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

“Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

In 1983 the world saw Luke Skywalker encounter Emperor Palpatine in Return of the Jedi. Luke tells the emperor, “Your overconfidence is your weakness.” And Palpatine responds, “Your faith in your friends is yours.”

He was wrong and so was anyone who doubted the paralyzed man’s friends in Capernaum. They wanted their friend to meet Jesus, but there is a crowd. Can’t go through it. Can’t go around it. Better go over it! Up on the rooftop, dig, dig, dig, they create a hole in the earthen ceiling and lower their friend in on his mat. Seeing “their faith” — apparently the faith of the friends — Jesus tells the man that his sins are forgiven, that whatever heaviness or guilt or judgment he has been carrying is removed.

Note: He didn’t heal the man. Not yet. He didn’t say anything about the man’s disability at all. But this declaration of forgiveness causes grumbling from the scribes who were, it would appear, sitting in the house and listening to Jesus.

“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Jesus is all over them like a teacher who catches students passing notes. He’s got questions of his own: “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’”

Jesus demonstrates his authority in the realm of forgiveness by healing, but it seems, for him, the healing is an afterthought. He knows it will rattle them. But it’s not the part he is most interested in.

He has spoken what sounded like blasphemous words, decoupling forgiveness from any rituals or any priests or any institution. A new language of grace will sound like a threat to those invested in the status quo.

Have you heard how he talks?

Taking no time to dance in the end zone, Jesus is off to the lakeshore to teach. He spots another disciple-to-be in Levi the tax collector. In church we like to remind each other that, back then, tax collectors were severely disliked, such a far cry from the beloved heroes we consider them today. But the scorn for someone like Levi wasn’t just for taking my hard-earned coins. Tax collectors were fraternizing with the occupiers, funneling money to Rome and likely skimming off the top.

Newly-claimed as a disciple, Levi brings Jesus to his home, along with a band of other tax collectors and sinners following him. Guess who’s coming to dinner!

This time, the scribes don't mutter to themselves but go to the disciples and I want to give them credit for being a bit more direct but I suspect they were also thinking, "He's just going to perceive in his spirit that we've got questions."

They ask, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But Jesus overheard them and he explains about how those who are well don't need a doctor and that he's come for sinners, not the righteous.

And we have a decision to make about just how much "bless your heart" is in what Jesus says here. Is he sincerely saying "I'm here for the sick. If you're righteous, you're all good"? Or is it more like my mom telling me that, yes, I can sleep in a crib like my infant brother because big boy beds are only for big boys?

I'm not certain which it is. I hear the very busy Jesus simply explaining the scandalous mission he is on, and that if you are not in need of healing, hey, — Yahtzee! — count your blessings. I also hear the combative Jesus implying that if you think you're less in need of grace than his dinner guests — or, rather, if you are counting up the sins of his dinner guests — you might want to reconsider.

Have you seen who he spends his time with?

It's not the scribes this time, but simply "people" who come directly to him and want to know why his disciples aren't participating in the current fast. Jesus explains that this not the time for fasting, while he is here. They need to soak up every bit of life they can get now, and that there will be a fast to come, when he is taken away. This leads to him talking about the cloak with a hole in it and the old wineskins.

An unshrunk patch will shrink and mess up both the patch and the cloak. An old wineskin has become brittle after use, and so to ferment new wine in it would be a bad idea.

Jesus is up to something here. There's something new, and it cannot simply be slapped onto the old, or both will crumble. He's concerned with the cloak and the old wineskin, not just the patch and the new wine. His disciples will not fast simply because everyone else is fasting, because it's tradition, because it's prescribed. But they will not abandon the tradition, either. They will fast in response to what happens in their community and what God needs from them.

Why aren't they getting with the program?

Have you heard how they talk?

Have you seen who they spend their time with?

Have you noticed how they don't follow the rules?

A new language of grace.

Scandalous company.

Reimagining the tradition.

These are questions that are asked of the Beloved Community.

Look at that nation.

Have you heard how they talk?

Of freedom for all and equality in opportunity and education and citizenship requiring concern for neighbor.

Have you seen who they spend their time with?

Caring for the vulnerable and the ill and ensuring that all have enough space around the table to eat and rejoice. They are more suspicious of the hyper-wealthy and more interested in the lives of the impoverished.

Have you noticed how they don't follow the rules?

They innovate. They don't accept poverty and violence as part of their tradition that needs to be carried forward.

Look at that church.

Have you heard how they talk?

Of love and forgiveness for all and an invitation to be transformed while bringing your whole God-formed self to transform the community.

Have you seen who they spend their time with?

They don't seem interested in status or judgment. They celebrate diversity. They welcome with arms that are opened instead of crossed. They seem to think they have as much to learn as they do tell.

Have you noticed how they don't follow the rules?

They beg inspiration from the Spirit. They say, "Let's try that — that's the way we've never done it!"

I firmly believe that the world is better and freer and healthier now than it has ever been. And yet...

Racism not only persists, but has been given fertile soil and plenty of nourishment and been encouraged to spread at the highest levels of wealth and power. The Beloved Community is being actively opposed.

Christ calls his disciples, then and now, to live lives and create communities that perplex, befuddle, and evoke muttering and exasperated questions. Questions mean curiosity. Curiosity opens a pathway to transformation. And there we find the potential for the dream to grow.

Have you heard?

Have you seen?

Have you noticed?

Amen.