

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 7, 2024

This morning, my friends, we will be spending some time in Mark's gospel, but before we do that, I invite you to take a breath with me,... and let us go to God together in prayer.

“Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, tune my heart to sing thy praise. Streams of Mercy never ceasing, Lord, you call for songs of loudest praise. So teach us some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above. Lord, here's your mount, we're fixed upon it. Mount of thy redeeming love.”

And so, God of Grace and God of Glory, speak now a word to your people, a word that will comfort and correct, a word that will challenge us and send us out to do your will and to follow you. It's in Christ's name that we do pray. Amen.

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Mark's gospel, the 2nd chapter the 13th through the 22nd verse. Reads like this:

Power of the Kin(g)dom: The Old, the New, and the Unexpected **Mark 2:13-22**

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-collection station, 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 not come to call 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 attendants 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. Similarly, 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.”

The grass withers and the flower thereof fades, but the word of our God endures forever. Thanks be to God.

My friends, this week begins a new worship series, entitled The Power of the Kingdom. And so over the next few weeks, we will sit with the many different ways that the kingdom of God is described in Mark's gospel and glimpse how the kingdom is yet breaking through to our world right now. Over the next few weeks we will be invited, even challenged, to wrestle together with

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 7, 2024

the call on each of our lives to build for the kingdom of God, remembering, as Pastor David reminded us a few weeks ago during Advent, that as followers of Christ our job is to seek the kingdom, to receive it, to bear witness to it, to build for the kingdom of God. Christ Our Savior builds it. We build for it. And so over the next few weeks as we wrestle with the call on each of our lives to build for the kingdom of God, we will reflect together on how that call changes our very lives.

And you know that theme of life changing calls—that could be the subtitle to the scripture before us this morning, because that's precisely what Jesus's call of Levi is. It's a life changing call. I mentioned during the 8:30 service that if you just walked in off the streets, that this language of call that we are so comfortable with in Christendom can be really off putting. If you're a member of the younger church, if you keep hearing this word call, then maybe you're waiting for your phone to ring. Maybe you're waiting on someone to send you a text message; but when we talk about call in our faith, we're talking about that thing within us that God and God alone is able to touch—that purpose, that sense of belonging, that sense of identity that God can latch onto and pull out of us. That's the call that we're talking about, but no one called on Levi like that. Levi was only ever used to having his name called in lament and disgust and anger or even disdain. He was only ever expecting a call to come through to help exploit and to manipulate and to control and to increase misery. A life changing call was totally unexpected, and it changed everything about Levi's life.

So there he is stationed at his post, dutifully fulfilling his responsibility as a tax collector, dutifully extracting an unjust and oppressive tax from his fellow Jews. He's dutifully reproducing financial hardships and burdens on some of the same people that he grew up with and played with and worshiped with and shared community with. That's why this call was so unexpected, not only for Levi but for everyone else; because as a tax collector Levi had effectively sold out his own people. He had rented out his intimate knowledge of what made his fellow Jews tick, what they cared about, what brought them the most joy, what brought them the most pain, the thing that could be easily exploited by Rome in order to get the outcome that Rome desired most. Levi had allowed himself to become an instrument of Roman oppression, and that alone landed him on the list of Public Enemies, because his work made it easier for Rome to do their job and made it all the more difficult for Israel to be devoted to God fully. Levi is at work, and he's doing what he has come to believe he is supposed to do; and then Jesus calls.

Beloved, that's something that we ought to hold on to because so much of this scripture and indeed the kingdom of God turns on the willingness of people who are doing what they believe they are supposed to do to be interrupted unexpectedly by Jesus and take the risk to do something different. He's at work doing what he believes he's supposed to do and is called by Jesus, and Levi responds by following him. Now, perhaps, it's just out of gratitude that someone finally called him and wasn't angry with him, someone finally called him and actually wanted to be with him, perhaps it's out of that gratitude or even out of a practice of Galilean hospitality, but Levi responds by telling Jesus, "Come on over; let's have dinner." And word that Jesus is Levi's dinner guest, word that Jesus has decided to eat at the tax collector's table has caused the guest

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 7, 2024

list at this dinner party to swell to capacity with an untold number of Levi's fellow tax collectors and those that Mark only records as sinners. But there are a few more dinner guests at this party. They might not have even been invited in the first place. The text tells us they're not sitting at the table breaking bread with everyone else; they're...they're not even lingering at the bar a bit too long. No, they're off to the side in the background even, but they're talking just loudly enough for you to hear. We've all been at dinner before and decided to ear hustle a bit into somebody else's conversation when they're talking just loudly enough. That's what these folks are doing, and they're complaining. I mean—

“I mean that's the Carpenter's son after all. What would you expect of him?”

“I just don't understand how he can claim to be so devout but can accept a dinner invitation from Levi. It's all so improper.”

“You mean to tell me he thinks he can really get away with this? Just wait until they hear about it at the temple.”

“Why is he dining with tax collectors and sinners?”

There's this steady chorus of complaints coming from the sidelines by the scribes of the Pharisees, complaints about Jesus dining with disreputable folks. Never mind the fact that they are complaining while being in attendance at the very same dinner. But today, for once, I don't want to make the Pharisees the bad guys, as we so often do; and instead of centering Levi's story of a life-changing call, I want to talk about the experience of the Pharisees. Now hear me clearly. I am not a Pharisee apologist. I'm not here to make excuses for the Pharisees, but I do believe that the power of the Kingdom becomes much more evident when we look at this text from the perspective of the Pharisees. Here's their issue. It's bad enough that Jesus keeps claiming to believe in the same God that they believe in, keeps claiming to speak for God, and with God's authority keeps claiming to be one with God, and to come from God, and be devoted to God. It's bad enough that Jesus keeps doing all of those things, but now to be willingly dining with sinners and tax collectors no less, it's an insult to injury. It's literally salt in the wound, a slap in the face, to claim to seem like the Savior but consistently continue to do things that, for them, they just don't expect a savior to do.

Beloved, we ought to be honest with one another, because the tension the scribes of the Pharisees are sitting with is often a tension that gives rise to some uncomfortable feelings that we rarely verbalize about God. That the one who we hear is proclaimed the Messiah by angels and astounds the temple teachers, that the one who is baptized by John and who God claims as the Beloved son, that the one we read about healing and feeding and teaching and by all measures seems to be the Savior keeps doing things in our lives that we do not expect the Savior to do. If we're honest we share some of the Pharisees' frustrations even if we don't regularly admit it. So allow me to give you an opportunity to do so in worship today, because has God ever failed to live up to your expectations? Has God ever moved within your life in such a way that at best you were a bit confused and at worse you were downright angry? Has God ever exhausted you, because God just kept acting in a way that bumped up against your expectations of how things were supposed to be? In so many ways that's the experience of the Pharisees and scribes. They

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 7, 2024

are confused because Jesus is challenging what they believe to be the best way to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation before God. They are frustrated because Jesus is offering a conflicting vision of what it means to be faithful under the weight of Roman occupation and oppression. They are being unsettled and made uncomfortable by this guy who gladly hangs out with tax collectors and sinners and yet seems to have the power to do what only the Messiah can do, to do the very thing they have been desperately waiting on. That must have been infuriating, must have been infuriating to live with. After all there were these clear rules to follow and certain established ways, time tested ways that things were done. There were clearly prescribed times and methods that God would use to engage them and that they would use to experience God; and on top of all of that they had scripture to back them up. They thought they had it all figured out and so would not tolerate, just would not tolerate when something challenged their closely held beliefs, couldn't stand it when something confronted their embedded theology, couldn't...couldn't abide it when the lens through which they saw the world and made sense of the world was challenged.

My friends, how do you respond when Jesus breaks your rules, when Jesus just refuses to play by the rules of the game of the life you've created for yourself, when Jesus decides to trespass on your sense of comfort and certainty? Allow me to say it for you if you can't say it for yourself, it's infuriating. And all this frustration is beginning to leak out while this dinner party is taking place at Levi's house. If you listen closely you can hear the scribes' voices growing louder. "He's a tax collector; he's the reason my mother lost her retirement savings; he's a tax collector and he...he's going to dine at his house and claim that God is okay with this. Look at them, they're all sinners, unrepentant sinners, and he claims that God in him is well pleased." You can hear their voices begin to rise as their frustrations come to a head, and then Jesus finally responds; and as Jesus so often does, he responds in a parable because Jesus can't give a straight answer to save his life. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." Now there are a few ways in my imagination that this went over. I believe there were a few who heard Jesus say this and thought, "I have no earthly clue what he's trying to get at." Others could have heard what he said and taken offense and decided they might start flipping tables at this dinner party, but I imagine there were one or two in the back who...who heard what Jesus said, and it sunk through all of their frustrations, and he got the spirit of what he was trying to say, because, beloved, I don't believe in this text Jesus is making a wholesale rejection of the folks who got it all right, the folks who have it all together. He says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." And I believe that Christ is challenging us to recognize that in the power of the kingdom. It is forcing us to rethink our understanding of righteousness and sin. Beloved, Jesus in offering this parable, invites us into a new vision of the kingdom of God, a kingdom in which those who have figured it out already and those who have already learned to trust God with the hard things are joined by those of us who are still struggling under the weight of the very things we haven't learned to trust God with. Christ is reminding us in this parable that the kingdom of God breaks into our world and comes precisely for those things that you have not been able to accept, for those things that you are still ashamed of, that the power of the Kingdom breaks through to bring healing to those places where you have not told anyone just how deeply the hurt has touched.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, January 7, 2024

“I’ve not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Perhaps, beloved, if we detangle our ideas of righteousness from being blameless and right and recognize that a righteous life is a life lived fully reliant on the power of God, if we connect righteousness and reliance, then perhaps what Christ is pointing us to here is an understanding of sin that has little to do with doing bad things, but rather living our lives as if God is not sovereign, as if we are not wholly reliant on the grace of God. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, for the righteous already rely on me. It’s the sinners who have never heard the invitation.” It’s at a dinner party in Levi’s house, of all places, that Jesus makes this very invitation not to the other tax collectors that are in attendance nor the sinners but to the scribes of the Pharisees to recognize the power of the Kingdom unfolding in their midst, challenging them to let the old remain in its proper place, not trying to force it to do what it was not made to do, and inviting them to engage the new with curiosity not contempt, and see what is possible, to leave room for the unexpected. That invitation—it takes the form of another parable, a familiar one about old cloaks and new wineskins, a short exchange that’s trying to push the Pharisees to realize that they too belong to the kingdom of God, not because they are righteous, but rather because their righteousness has become a sinful idol that they have not trusted God with, that for all of their practices and rituals and rules they have forsaken the deeply human ways that God calls each of us into relationship. The challenge that Christ lays at their feet as he paints a picture of a threadbare cloak patched with pristine fabric and a well-worn wine skin filled with unprepared wine, it’s a challenge to the scribes to recognize that perhaps they didn’t have God all figured out, that perhaps God could move in ways they did not expect.

I wonder what the challenge is that Christ lays before you today. You know intimately what it is, an over reliance on your own efforts, education, your connections and influence. You know what the challenge is. You know what the sin is, in the midst of your own righteousness, that needs to be offered up to God, because no matter how righteous we might believe ourselves to be, we are reminded that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” And, beloved, for us that is unexpected good news this day, because it means by his own words that Christ has come for each of us, whatever the need may be. Whether our righteousness outweighs our sinfulness or our sinfulness masks our righteousness, the invitation is still extended, that Christ invites us to gather and be seen and to follow him. Beloved, as I said I am not a Pharisee apologist. I think they got it wrong. Please don’t be like the Pharisees. Do not hold so tightly to your comfort and your certainties that you refuse the unexpected invitation of Christ to bear witness to the new thing that God is doing in your world. Take the risk to respond faithfully. Go ahead and accept the invitation, join the party, and then prepare the way for others to do likewise.

To the glory of God. Amen.