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Sick of Religion?: Yucky People

Mark 2:13-17

Well...we proved last weekend that you read my blog! Nearly 1500 people showed up to hear the worst kept secret in the history of this church: Chapel Hill is moving to Port Orchard. Not all of us...but some of us. Pastor Megan will be leading the charge. We believe God is calling us to plant a campus in Port Orchard. It will still be Chapel Hill. One Session, one Senior Pastor, one budget. But Megan will devote her full attention to what will be our first great "Beyond These Walls" initiative.

And you are obviously excited! We had two town halls and they were both standing room only! You are eager to hear how God will use us to reach the unchurched and the de-churched in Port Orchard. In the not too-distant future, a new Chapel Hill worship service will be launched somewhere in that beautiful waterfront town. Woohoo!

This evening/morning, as we continue our series "Sick of Religion." we find ourselves in another beautiful waterfront town. Capernaum was Jesus' home base. Here he launched his ministry with a bang: teaching the word, casting out evil spirits, healing a leper! Last week we watched four guys climb through the crowds, up on top of Peter's house, tear a hole in the roof and lower their paralyzed friend down to the feet of Jesus...who pronounced him forgiven... AND gave him new legs! A beautiful thing.

But there was some ugliness, too. For the first time, the religious snobs show up. The scribes...the religious lawyers...were taking all kinds of pot shots at Jesus. As we see tonight/today, these knuckleheads were only getting warmed up! In fact, Mark can't even tell the story without a little sarcasm. There was no such thing as air quotes in the first century. But if there HAD been, they belong right here! So...I want you to help me out. Every time you hear the word, "sinners" in the story...put it in air quotes, OK? Get your hands up; let's practice. "Sinners." Perfect. Here we go. Mark 2: 13-17

He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "It is not the well who have need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Capernaum was a thriving fishing town and part of that business involved the tax man. As Jesus walked along the shore, he passed the tax booth of a guy named Levi. You know him as Matthew the gospel-writer. But when Jesus first meets him, he is Levi the tax guy. There's a reason his booth was by the shore. So that when the boats came in, he could count their catch and make sure they weren't hiding anything from him.

I went to my accountant Friday to prepare my taxes. Most people dislike paying taxes. But the first century Jews HATED it because every tax man was a traitor and a crook. They worked for Rome. It would be like an

American fighting for ISIS. How would we feel about that guy? Tax collectors were collaborators who betrayed their people to make a buck. AND...they were crooks. They MADE their money by shaking down the taxpayer. It would be like an IRS agent squeezing protection money out of you.

The tax collector was a pariah, only SLIGHTLY higher on the social ladder than the leper. A tax man could not be a witness in court, could not attend synagogue, he was a disgrace to his family. Beggars were forbidden to receive alms from tax collectors.¹ They were the scum of the Jewish earth.

SO...can you imagine the shock when Jesus, strolling along with his fishing buddies, spots Levi the Tax Guy...and invites HIM to follow. That word "follow" for Mark...that's an important word! It means faith. It means conversion. It means discipleship. How do you think the rest of the boys felt about THAT addition to their merry band? This was the guy who screwed them out of their hard-earned money; who stole food from their children's mouths. Now, he was one of them? Outrageous!

But you ain't seen nothin' yet! In typical Mark fashion...with no transition or explanation... the next line we read is, "And as he reclined at table in his house..." We are still shocked that Jesus would call Levi. Now, he is eating dinner at his house? If a tax collector even TOUCHED someone's house, it was considered unclean! How unclean was the house where the tax man lived? Yet here is Jesus, dining with him. And let me show you what that meant. (Lie down) THIS is how they ate. Reclining at table... on the ground...next to each other...with their stinky feet away from the food. It was very intimate.

And it wasn't just Levi reclining with Jesus. "...many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him." A whole HOUSEFULL of unclean people! And there's that word, "sinner." The first of four appearances. Synonymous with "tax collector" but a wider swath of people. It included prostitutes, drunkards, gamblers. But it ALSO included people who just weren't religious enough. Shepherds were "sinners." Those who worked on the Sabbath were sinners. Anyone who did not eat the right foods or wash themselves ritually or fast or observe all of the 613 rules of the Pharisees...were considered "sinners."

In other words, some "sinners" were miscreants and criminals... but some were just so poor or busy or ignorant that they couldn't keep up with all the religious rules. Whatever the reason, "sinners" were outsiders. They were not "in" ...and they were not welcome "in."

Unlike the religious people... unlike the scribes. When these guys show up in the story, we are reminded why Jesus was sick of religion. It might help to define what I mean by religion: Religion is "Right behavior that is meant to earn God's favor." And that describes the Scribes. They behaved themselves, they knew and followed all the rules, they avoided yucky people who did not obey the rules and therefore ...TADA!...they were God's favorites. And those who did NOT follow the rules...like tax collectors and "sinners"...were not in the religious club and were to be avoided, shunned and shamed at all costs.

Until Jesus came along. Rabbi Jesus had a place in his heart...and in his circle...for the yucky people. For Jesus, it was not about righteous behavior or following the rules. It was about following HIM...and allowing him to change you into the person God created you to be. Suddenly...there was a place for broken, yucky people. And it didn't take long for the word to spread. Levi's house was packed with "sinners" eager to meet the rabbi who didn't view them...or treat them...like dirt.

And the scribes were outraged. As disgusted as they must have been, they went inside this "sinner's" house because they wanted to be outraged by the spectacle of Jesus reclining with these sinners. In last week's

¹ Jim Edwards, *Mark*, p. 83.

story..." the Scribes kept their critical thoughts to themselves until Jesus read their minds...which was awkward! THIS time...they can't keep their mouths shut. And so...they murmur.

There is a great tradition of murmuring in the Bible going back to the exodus from Egypt. Again and again we read that, no matter what God did to care for his children, they murmured. Grumbled. Grouched. Kvetched. To the point that God was ready to strike them down and start over! In this story, it's the scribes who murmur. And notice, they don't say anything to Jesus. They haven't worked up the guts yet. But they pull aside his disciples...they peel off his supporters...and murmur their disgust to them. "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

You know what they're doing, right? They are trying to drive a wedge between Jesus and his disciples with their breathless outrage. If their hearts were softer; if they were GENUINE religions leaders, they might have witnessed something amazing. They might have seen people who were far from God drawing closer to God. They might have celebrated that. But their hearts were hard and they were TICKED because their world of right behavior and proper religion...religion done a certain way...was being upended...and they didn't like it. So...they murmured.

There are few things more toxic or more contagious than murmuring. Murmuring is like the flu. It is passed from one carrier to another. Now I'm not talking about healthy disagreement or hard questions. Jesus taught us how to do that. If you are upset about something, go to the person; hash it out; face to face. I've had some of those conversations recently. That is healthy! But I'm talking about murmuring. Complaining. Side comments to someone else that are not intended to help or heal anything; they are only intended to stir up trouble. Murmuring is deadly.

And guess what; it can even happen in a Sweetheart Church. As you know, we are trying to do a better job of reaching out beyond these walls. We had become ingrown, a little self-centered...and we knew we needed to do more to welcome outsiders. So we've tried some new things. Some of our ideas worked. Others, not so well. But God has blessed our risk-taking. Did you know that last weekend's attendance was up by over 500 people, year to year! A 52% increase! That is something to be celebrated and I know most of you are thrilled to hear that! BUT...change is hard...and it has stirred up some murmuring. Way more than usual.

So I want to ask you to do something. As you listen to the scribes' murmurings... it is a perfect opportunity to ask...what does your after-service conversation sound like? Do you say, "Wow...God is using us to plant a new church!" or "Wow...God did something incredible among our kids in Mexico" or "Wow, God spoke through Megan" or "Wow, wasn't that anthem beautiful."

OR...honestly...do you catch yourself murmuring about the thing you didn't like? The volume or the lighting or the seating or the music. What would happen if, in our every conversation...whether in church or home or work or school...if the first word we spoke was a word of encouragement or compliment or affirmation...and not murmuring?

The scribes' murmuring revealed just how elitist they were. They were outraged that Jesus would associate with yucky people...in contrast, of course, to themselves; the upright, religious folk. And here's where Jesus weighs in with a little sarcasm of his own. "It is not the well who have need of a physician, but those who are sick."

In Jesus' time, there was no such thing as preventive care! You didn't go to the doctor for a physical. As Jesus says, the only time you went to a doctor was when you were sick! And after the illustration, comes the mic drop! "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Remember those air quotes? Jesus could have used them right here. "I came not to call the 'RIGHTEOUS'...but sinners."

The Scribes considered themselves “righteous” and the rest of the crowd “sinners.” The scribes were the ones who knew what real religion looked like. THEY were the guardians of what was proper and spiritual. They were the preachers and teachers. Or to put it a different way...a way that makes me very uncomfortable...the scribes were the Senior Pastors of their time. And they didn’t even recognize the biting irony in Jesus’ words: They weren’t “righteous” at all. THEY were the yucky people in this story! THEY were the sinners. And their self-righteousness oozes off the page!

The fact is, people are sick of religion because they are sick of religious people. When the church is more concerned with taking care of itself and keeping out the riff raff ...it finds itself in opposition to its Lord. Jesus told us his mission: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” When we who have been “found” become proud of being found and consumed with protecting ourselves from the influence of “sinners” ...we cease being the church.

I received an anonymous Welcome Card recently. (By the way, I’ll just point out, these are NOT complaint cards. They are welcome cards. Just saying.) Normally anonymous cards are thrown out. If you won’t sign your name, I’m not interested. But this one slipped through. It said, “I believe the primary purpose of the shepherd is to feed the sheep, to tend the sheep ... not find new sheep. The primary purpose of the church is for believers, not unbelievers.”

I know some people think that. I could not disagree more. And this text is one reason: Jesus said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Which is pure irony, of course. Because, as Paul wrote, “There are NONE who are righteous, no not one!” As John wrote, “If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Jesus came to save sinners. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. WE are those lost people; we are those sinners whom Jesus sought and saved. WE are the yucky ones that Christ transforms by the power of his Spirit. And if we, who are now insiders by God’s grace will not go to... talk to...eat with...welcome in...other “yucky people”...we deny the very call and mission of Jesus Christ.