

Of Empty Tax Stations and New Wineskins

There are 3 little mini stories told or 5 snapshots presented in our Scripture lesson for this morning, 3 little stories or 5 snapshots that help us to grasp a very big picture. Betty Jane and I just got back from the Grand Canyon, but to tell you that we actually saw the Grand Canyon would be a great exaggeration. The Grand Canyon is 277 miles long, as much as 11 miles wide and a mile deep. The park ranger told us that the Grand Canyon is so vast, with so many nooks and crannies that there are places within the canyon where no human being has ever been. What any of us know of the Grand Canyon is only a fraction of what is really there; we know the Grand Canyon only by hearing its stories and by seeing its snapshots. So before we get to the big picture of our Scripture lesson today, let's look at the little stories and snapshots.

Story number one is found in Mark 2:13-14: "Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him."

The call to follow Jesus is an invitation to a new life. Levi, known also to us as Matthew, was taken by surprise. Rejected and hated by most, if not by all, in the crowd that followed Jesus that day, Jesus stops at his booth and, in front of them all, selects him to become His disciple. The crowd had to have been stunned and Matthew himself would have been amazed. Jesus is calling me to be with Him? Everyone else rejects me, but what is this great wonder, Jesus receives me? This is my chance for a new life and I'm going to take it.

Consider this first snapshot. It's a snapshot of Levi. He has a look of awe on his face and tears of gratitude in his eyes. Jesus has given him value, looked past the sin and loved the man, given him a brand new beginning. Save the snapshot of Levi, of Matthew, to the hard drive of your memory.

Story number two is told in Mark 2:15, a great story in just one verse. "While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him."

With the addition of verse 15 there are now two wonders before us. The first wonder is that Jesus loves Matthew, Levi,

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hated tax collector, and calls Him to be His follower. The second wonder is that Jesus doesn't stop there. Had Jesus stopped with Levi, we might have been left to conclude that Levi was an exception; that Jesus saw something special in him and called him out from the rest of his class. Putting it in today's terms, it wouldn't be so hard to believe that Jesus loves one drug addict or that He is able to turn around one pusher. It wouldn't be so hard to believe that Jesus would call one abortion Dr. to leave his clinic and become a follower of the Lord. Our minds allow that there are exceptions to every rule.

But what if we should see Jesus fellowshiping with a whole drug cartel or attending a convention of abortionists? What if we saw Jesus accepting an invitation to dinner with a party of homosexuals? The second wonder is that Jesus' love is not just for the exception but for the whole class; He loves not just the one but the many--not just one illegal immigrant but all.

Now perhaps we begin to understand where the Teachers of the law, the Pharisees, were coming from in verses 16 & 17: "When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?' On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Does the snapshot found in verse 15 comfort us or offend us? Does it comfort you or make you uncomfortable? It depends on how you perceive yourself and with whom you see yourself. If we see ourselves among the morally and spiritually healthy, or perhaps among the morally and spiritually superior, then we are apt to be offended by Jesus' love for such soiled souls. But if we understand that we too are sinners made clean only by the blood of Jesus, or if we too have experienced great failure and have been caught by His grace, then we accept what Jesus is doing. That's just Jesus being Jesus. To love the lost is why He came. To love them and to love us and to bring us together in one family is His nature and His mission. What a wonder He is. Take this second snapshot, Jesus loving not just the one but also the many; take this snapshot and save it to the hard drive of your memory.

Story number 3 is found in Mark 2:18-20: "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came

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and asked Jesus, 'How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?' Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.'"

What we see, beginning in Mark 2, is conflict which leads ultimately to Jesus' crucifixion. The conflict is between the religious establishment and the person and teachings of Jesus. The pattern is this: Jesus performs a miracle or delivers a teaching, and the religious people find fault, deliver criticism, and condemn. In the verses before us a complaint is brought against Jesus for the freedom He allows His disciples. In the mind of the religionists they are having too much fun. They should look more somber, be more centered on and more sorrowful for their sins. They should abstain from food at least twice a week as a continual act of contrition.

It is significant to note that the religionists of Jesus' day were going way beyond the requirements of the Jewish law in regards to fasting. As far as the Law of Moses was concerned, the Jews were required to fast only once a year and that on the Day of Atonement. Otherwise they were to remember the counsel of Nehemiah that the joy of the Lord was their strength. Celebration would bring them closer to God than self-imposed sorrow. This is not to say that Jesus was opposed to fasting. He fasted 40 days and nights at the beginning of His ministry. One time when His disciples failed to cast out a certain demon, He told them: "this kind goes out only by prayer and fasting." He tells them that "the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast." Fasting had its place and still does. But, it is not to be practiced legalistically. Nor is it to be practiced to show off how religious we are or allowed to become an issue of spiritual pride. The joy of the Lord is still our strength. The Lord will be with us at our church picnic this afternoon.

Jesus' answer to His religious complainers and accusers is two-fold. First, He answers their question about fasting with a question of His own: "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast." This may seem like a rather strange answer to us: Why in the world is Jesus

talking about wedding guests and bridegrooms? The answer is asked for in the form of the accusation which is made. Notice that the religionists were trying to include the disciples of John the Baptist in the controversy. "The disciples of the Pharisees fast and the disciples of John the Baptist fast: How come your disciples don't?"

The point for us to catch here is that Jesus and John the Baptist were friends and relatives. Some of Jesus' disciples had come to Him from John with John's blessing. The followers of John the Baptist were natural allies of Jesus and His disciples, but the religionists wanted to break up this alliance, and win the followers of John to their side. That's why the accusers mention John's disciples in their question. And Jesus, who knows exactly what they are trying to pull off, knows how to respond.

The image of the bridegroom comes originally from John. One time when John's disciples became jealous of Jesus and the following Jesus was getting, they complained to John. John said, "I am not the Christ; I have only been sent before Him as the forerunner, the one to announce His arrival." In John 3:29, John the Baptist goes on to say, "The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

So, when Jesus brings up this same picture in his answer to his religious critics, he frustrates their plan to turn any of John's disciples or former disciples away from Him. He reminds those disciples that He is the bridegroom and that John had said that He would become greater while John faded into the background. Everything was going according to God's plan. It's not necessary nor appropriate for the wedding guests to fast while the bridegroom is present with them. It is a time for rejoicing, not for fasting. Their joy will not be taken from them. See Jesus skillfully answering His critics and using their own ammunition against them. Picture the joy of the wedding guests in the presence of the bridegroom. Save this snapshot to the hard drive of your mind.

Snapshot numbers 4 and 5 come from the same story as snapshot 3. They make up the second part of Jesus' answer to His critics as found in verses 21-22: Jesus says, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new

piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins." Can you picture the snapshots, unshrunk cloth on an old garment, new wine being poured into old wineskins?

This, of course, is a warning to us and a reminder that if we are going to receive fresh doses of God's Spirit throughout our lives, we need to stay open to His guidance and willing to obey His leading. The human tendency is to try to pin God down to a simple formula that we can follow and never have to change again. If we can just figure it out: how often do we have to pray? How many verses of Scripture must we read each day? How often do we have to attend worship? How much do we have to give? How much work do we have to do to be good Christians. Tell us that God; we just need to know and everything will be o.k.

That's how a lot of people would like to approach Christ, but that's not how Christ approaches us. He's not looking for religious rule keepers or bead counters; He's looking for followers. He wants people who will give Him free access to their hearts and minds and to their whole lives every day, people who will listen for His voice and respond to His love. He wants a living relationship not a dead religion. Holy Spirit wine is bubbling and expansive; it cannot be contained in old dried out inflexible skins. The question is are we willing to be new skins for the new wine? Save these snapshots to your hard drive.

What larger picture or story emerges, as we consider the snapshots that we have looked at and saved to memory this morning? Can you see Levi smiling? Jesus eating with bunches of tax collectors and sinners? Wedding guests in celebration mode? Shrunk and unshrunk cloth? Old and new wineskins? What do these images tell us about Jesus Christ? Do they not tell us that He has come to bring us new beginnings? Do they not tell us that He has come to give us life more abundant and free? Do they not show us that God loves and will save all manner of sinners, even ones like us? Do they not tell us that Jesus will oppose every and all attempts to take the good news of the Gospel and turn it into something oppressive and sad?

Listen to the stories and look at the snapshots. What do they tell you about Jesus? What is this Jesus saying to you this morning? What do you see? What do you hear Him saying?

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Sermon for June 3, 2007

Of Empty Tax Booths and New Wineskins

Mark 2:12-22

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