

Mark 2:1-22

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, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' At once 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 lake; 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.'

Psalm 103:6-14

The Lord works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.

It's rough dealing with other peoples' expectations, isn't it?

Whether it's our parents' expectations of the kind of young
person we would be, whether they were around or not,

or our kids' expectations that we will always be the terminally
clueless people they saw us as when they were teenagers,¹

¹ At one point or another, I'm convinced that every teenager or young adult laments that "Parents Just Don't Understand."

or people out there's expectations that we "church people" will be moralistic, hypocritical, and controlling,

or the expectations of fellow churchgoers that we will, of course, do things "the way they've always been done."

Expectations can be constricting.

The three vignettes in the Scripture reading that Jan read all revolve around expectations confounded.

In the first story, the healing of the paralytic, the man's friends defy all social conventions. They can't get through the crowds, so they cut a hole in the roof! They lower the man down on ropes, so that he plops down right in front of Jesus, while he's teaching!

Jesus heals the man, which is what he and his friends were hoping for, of course, but Jesus tells him that his sins are forgiven. That goes beyond anything that they were expecting, and beyond what the lawyers in the audience were expecting, too. They murmur to each other that only God can forgive sins against God. We can forgive sins against us, and we should, but only God can forgive sins against God.

Who does this Jesus guy think he is?

Then Jesus calls a tax collector to follow him.

Let me tell you how taxes work in the Roman world. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate or one of his predecessors, appoints a local person as the tax collector for an area. There are no rates, no deductions or returns. This tax collector is given a quota – give the governor this much money. He can collect it however he likes. He has the power to decide what your taxes are, based on whatever criteria he likes. He can call in the legions to enforce his decisions, to take what he decides is “your share” of taxes.

Nobody accounts for these taxes, except to make sure that the collector remits the total he’s supposed to remit to the governor. Nobody tracks how much the collector collects. I’m not saying that tax collectors are all completely corrupt, but no one seriously believes it’s a coincidence that they are the richest guys in town.

As a result, tax collectors are not the most popular people around. They are generally seen as selling out their own people for Roman money, and as having no principles. That’s why they are lumped in with “sinners,” in the description – the main difference between a tax collector and a bandit, in the experience of ordinary people, is that the bandit uses his own sword.

And Jesus calls a tax collector to follow him as one of his core people. And then he sits down to dinner at Levi’s house, with Levi’s fellow tax-collectors and sinners. Now those same legal experts who objected to Jesus forgiving sins ask, “Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?”

These pillars of the community, the legal and religious scholars of their day, look at Jesus sitting with people who are not so respectable, and they judge him. “Look at the company he keeps,” they say. “That tells you everything you need to know about this Jesus of Nazareth character.”

They don’t ask Jesus their question – they ask his disciples, who haven’t been with him very long, and are in no position to respond. It’s not a real question. It’s rhetorical, trying to make Jesus look bad.

Jesus’ response throws their expectations completely out the window. “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.”

Jesus tells these people who have dedicated their lives to studying the Scriptures down to the last punctuation mark² that he’s not come for them. He implies that they’re doing okay, by obeying the law – he’s come to call those who need him.

Then the same pillars of the community are fasting. They see Jesus and his disciples eating and drinking. They are offended. They ask Jesus what the deal is.

Fasting, in Jewish tradition, is associated with repenting of sin and hoping for forgiveness. It’s associated with waiting and hoping for the

² That’s what jots and tittles are/

Messiah. Jews fast on certain traditional occasions today, most famously on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.³

All the respectable people are fasting, refraining from food and from life's pleasures. But Jesus' followers don't fast and mourn while he is with them. They're not waiting for signs of the Messiah — he's right there with them.

In all three of our vignettes this morning, Jesus confounds the people's expectations. And thank God that God is bigger than people seem to want God to be.

Jesus is God. He gets to forgive sins against God, even if that is disconcerting to some people. Thank God that sins can be forgiven.

Jesus and his disciples are not waiting for the Messiah to come. He has come, and here he is. Jesus came into the world to save people, and not just to save the self-righteous people. "For God so loved the whole *cosmos*, that [God] gave [God's] only Son so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send [God's] Son into the *cosmos* to judge the *cosmos*, but that the *cosmos* might be saved through him."⁴

Jesus is not only interested in saving the clean-cut people with perfect lives, perfect records, and, no doubt, perfect credit histories. Here's Jesus,

³ Fasting can be a valuable spiritual practice, for some. I'm told that it helps them focus on God and on prayer. I have tried it myself, and found it to have the opposite effect — I was continually distracted by my body. As they say, Your Mileage May Vary.

⁴ John 3:16-17, CEB, except for the word *cosmos*, which I left in the original Greek.

with the outsiders. The rest of the community may shun the tax collectors, but Jesus can change their lives, too.

Jesus does not fit in the boxes that some people want to put him in. Jesus does not even fit in the boxes that we sometimes want to put Jesus in. Jesus is not just bigger and better and more amazing than we imagine. Jesus is bigger and better and more amazing than we CAN imagine!

Every so often I hear someone say that, "We've kicked Jesus out of the schools," or, "We kicked God out of our country." I love the people who say that, but it's still nonsense.

God is here, in our midst, and we can't kick him out of anywhere. If we human beings kicked something out of America, or out of our schools, then, logically, it must have been less powerful than we are. That means it's not God. Don't worship it.

God is here! God's love and grace are available to us right here.

But we don't own God. We Presbyterians don't own God, and we Americans don't own God. The Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber was once fuming about "Stupid people who have the wrong opinions," and her husband reminded her, "Nadia, the thing that [stinks] is that every time we

draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always [there] on the other side of it.”⁵

God’s love and grace are available *there*, too. Wherever you just thought of when I said *there*.

This is Bad News if you’ve defined yourself as an insider, who can look down on the outsiders, *those people* who don’t belong.

This is Bad News if you’ve built yourself up as being the authority who draws these lines between the insiders and the outsiders. Sorry, there’s one authority who gets to do that, and it’s not us.

But, for everybody else, this is amazing Good News!

It is good news for the rich, and it is good news for the poor, and it is good news for the people who are somewhere in between. It is good news for the most powerful, and it’s good news for the totally helpless, and it’s good news for those of us in between. It’s good news for the Pharisees, whether they see it or not, and it’s good news for the Samaritans, and it’s good news even for the former tax collectors.

God’s love and grace and forgiveness are here for you. They will cost you your lines and your insider status, though.

⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, 57.

God's love and grace and forgiveness are here for you. They will cost you your put-upon airs and your outsider status, though.

Because there are no outsiders in God's kingdom. There are only beloved Children of God.

"You. Me. (shrug) *Them*. Everybody."⁶

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

⁶ *The Blues Brothers* reference intentional.