

The Life of the Party
January 28, 2018
Mark 2:13-22, Isaiah 52:7-10
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/sermon01-28-2018.mp3>*

Some of you may be aware of some part of this because of a rather celebrated posting I made on social media at the time, but I'd like to begin by sharing with you a memory of a recent car ride. I was driving a vehicle containing four generations, including a crying infant and a loudly-narrating toddler, four hearing aids, two functional hearing aid batteries, a retractable seatbelt that had retracted too far, a working GPS, and a co-pilot who made no secret of her disdain for the aforementioned GPS and its so-called "suggested route." As the noise and confusion and general sense of anarchy in the car escalated, I said, "Do I have to stop this car right now? I'll come back there and get things sorted out myself!"

Does anyone else have memories of hearing that phrase? My whole life, I've perceived it as a threat: "Do I have to stop this car?" "No! Dad, please, no! Don't do it! I'll straighten up!" No matter how bad things were in the back seat, not once did I ever perceive that it would be more pleasant for me if the *pater familias* had to make a visit.

It may be that others quietly pine for this sort of intervention. Perhaps my sister or brother remember the same ruckus in the rear of the old Ford and think, "Wow, it would have been so much better if Dad had ever once stopped and given David what he deserved..."

I'm thinking about that this morning because I remember that for hundreds of years, the Israelite prophets had lamented the fact that the world was in tough shape. People were simply not acting in accord with their best selves; they had left the intentions of God behind and were suffering because of it. But they continued to

point to a day when God himself would sort things out. God would send the Messiah, who would visit the creation and bring about restoration, justice, and the rule of God.

Isaiah 52, which you heard a few moments ago, is not atypical. The coming of the Servant is described, and “our team” is urged to break forth into singing! Good news! And there is an implication that there are those for whom this will be less than pleasant: the Lord “bares his arm” and “all the ends of the earth shall see it...” Oh, they’ll see it all right. You just see what they will see...

And then the Gospel of Mark is written, and declares right there in the first sentence that Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Son of God. John attests to his power and authority, and Jesus demonstrates those things himself as he teaches, preaches, exorcises, heals, and forgives. These activities of Jesus raise no small amount of interest from his fellow Jews.

But there is something curious... the more he does that looks and sounds like the kinds of things that a son of God might do, the less likely he is to be publicly embraced by the status quo. In chapter 1, he is a guest teacher at the local synagogue; as chapter 2 opens, he’s preaching in a private home; and in today’s reading he’s actually out preaching in the open air. It seems as though the more Godly he acts, the less credibility he’s awarded.



And then, in today’s reading, he meets up with Levi. Let me just tell you, this encounter does not bode well in terms of his popularity with the nation’s leadership team.

Think for a moment about those people who are so far under your skin that you have to relate to them as labels, and not people. I mean, you think of yourself as a fair-minded person, but seriously... you can only take so much, especially from *people like THAT*. Is it the illegals? The evangelicals? Those no-good (insert your favorite racial slur

here)? Muslims? The gun-control or Second Amendment crowds? Are you irked by the gays, the child abusers, the folks from PETA? Who is it that you are likely to dismiss with a sneer of derision or anger?

I'm not sure who's on your last nerve, but it's pretty clear that in today's reading, the folks on the outs are the "sinners and tax collectors." We know that because three times in two verses, it's pointed out to us that the presence of "tax collectors and sinners" has really gotten to the most religious folks in town. The language and the scene as described sets before us a real drama: if Jesus really is the messiah, the Son of God, and if the purpose of the messiah is to come back here and sort things out, well, then, how will Jesus treat the likes of *them*? If he is who he says he is, he'll let them have it, right?



So how amazing (or infuriating, I suppose, depending on your perspective) is it when his first word to one of *these people* is not one of condemnation, but rather invitation? He looks the old tax collector up and down and then says, just as he had to Simon and Andrew, "Follow me." And he reinforces that by being Levi's guest at dinner.

As that dinner progresses, we find that we're on the outside looking in – just like the Pharisees. These are men who have spent their whole lives trying to figure out what it meant to be on God's team, and here they are, watching this party, griping about the fact that Jesus was not giving Levi and his friends a good, solid theological butt-kicking. Not only was he not coming down hard on them, he was having a good time!

Here's a question: to whom were the Pharisees complaining?



Jesus' disciples. The implication is that at least some of the people who had accepted Jesus' invitation to follow were

themselves unable to swallow the notion that the Son of Man would spend any time with people like... like... like *those idiots*. Some of Jesus' disciples were not at the head table, and were apparently uncomfortable with how things seemed to be progressing here – and so they remain outside with the Pharisees.

As he so often does, Jesus becomes aware of the situation and reminds everybody that the Gospel is, by definition, Good News. Good News to everyone. And then he goes on to give a couple of folksy illustrations about patching clothes and making home brew – simple analogies that point out that he is not some sort of agent of Divine retribution here to settle old scores and whip deadbeats into shape.

All of which suggests to me that if, God forbid, Jesus Christ himself were to walk into our worship service this morning and greet us face to face, his first question to you or to me would *not* be any of these:

- who are you sleeping with these days, anyway?
- how could you possibly have voted for *that* person?
- why do you have so much (or so little) money?
- where's your birth certificate?
- if you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?

No, it seems to me that if Jesus were to show up in our lives, he'd act about as he does here: "Do you want to go somewhere and sit down for a few moments? You know, I could eat..."

Jesus isn't here to flip out on you, and he doesn't appear to be interested in dealing with stereotypes. Instead, he seems to be eager to engage you – your deepest you, the core of who you are.

So then today, as a pastor in the church of Jesus Christ and as a broken person who is doing his best to keep up with the man from Nazareth, I need to say that if you have shown up at this church – or at any church – and been told that Jesus is not willing

to waste his time on you because you are gay or rich or undocumented or republican or stoned or young or old... then I'm sorry. To whatever extent the church has rejected you, it has failed Jesus.

If you have ever gotten the message that Jesus is more interested in some character trait, habit, or condition that you display or practice, then please forgive the church for being unfaithful to our founder.

Because it's just not true. Jesus wants to sit down with you. And Jesus wants to sit down with *those people*.



And I realize that as I say this more than a few of us are sitting with the Pharisees, grumbling, “How can Pastor Dave say that? Does Jesus know what he’s saying? Does he know who they are? Does he care what they’ve done?”

Of course, Jesus knows all that. And we know that he knows that based on what he’s done so far in Mark’s gospel. He has been out teaching, because he knows that we are ignorant. He has been preaching, because he knows that we need to hear the Good News. He has been healing, because he knows our sicknesses; he has been exorcising, because he’s acquainted with our demons; and he has been welcoming because he’s aware of our estrangement. Jesus knows all that about us and comes to us time and time again... even when we can’t move toward each other.

Here’s the truth about the church in 21st-Century America: only 20% of people under the age of 30 believe that going to church is a worthwhile activity. 59% of young people who were raised in the church have dropped out. And a full 35% of Americans between the ages of 20 and 35 believe that the church

does more harm than good in the world.¹



So today, I have a word for those who *are* here, no matter why you may have come today. Can we join Jesus in remembering that the Gospel is good news for all people, and not a weapon with which we threaten those with whom we disagree? Can we remember that Jesus calls to us time and time again to invite our friends to come and see what he is up to, but never once commands us to go out and round up the sinners so he can give them the business? Can we join with Jesus in celebrating the notion that it is our deep privilege to share a word of reconciliation and hope and to seek to enlarge our world's ability to participate in the Kingdom of God, which is at hand?

This week, as you encounter another – especially someone for whom you have reserved some pretty saucy labels – can you pray for the grace to see them with the eyes of the savior, to hear them with his ears, and to speak gently and truthfully his loving words of invitation?

And let's remember the truth: when the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or when the Son of Man himself looks at us and says, "Do I need to come there and straighten things out?", the answer is always "yes, please."

Thanks be to God for the Son who comes and meets us in our brokenness and calls us to follow in his steps. Amen.

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.V-hxhLVy6FD>