

Mark 2:1- 22 - Second Sunday After Epiphany Jesus Heals and Teaches

Things continue at a whirlwind pace as we continue through the opening chapters of Marks' account of Jesus. By the end of the first chapter, as we heard last week, John the Baptist arrives on the scene; Jesus is baptized and tempted in the wilderness; he selects his first disciples. The first chapter didn't stop there although our reading did. It continued as Jesus casts out an evil spirit; heals many people, preaches in Galilee; and heals a man with leprosy. That is a lot of activity in just one chapter.

This pace continues in the second chapter. Jesus heals a paralysed man; he calls Matthew (Levi) and enters a discussion about fasting. The final verses which were not read, discuss the importance of the Sabbath. As it is, that is a lot of action to take in.

If Mark's Jesus generates healing and new life, he also generates equal amounts of conflict and opposition. Mark's first chapter is pretty much the only one in the gospel that doesn't reflect some form of conflict or controversy arising from Jesus' activity, although even here we have an ominous comparison between Jesus' authority and that of the scribes. What's all the fuss about? What could be upsetting or dangerous about somebody healing people?

Mark's second chapter provides the first "inciting event" in the plot of Mark's story. It foreshadows the way the main conflict in the story,

between Jesus and the religious leaders, will play out. Here, in this first encounter, Jesus is accused of blasphemy for presuming God's authority to forgive sins; it's the same charge that will ultimately lead to his being handed over to the Romans for execution.

The centrality of conflict in Mark is also evidenced by the care with which Mark composes this section. The healing of the paralytic is the first in a series of so-called controversy stories. This section is more or less a "ring composition," or "chiasm," in which the healing of the paralytic and its controversy correspond to the healing of the man with the withered hand at the end of the series, generating controversy in the same way. Two controversies about eating: dinner with Levi and plucking grain on the Sabbath, frame the central story as it becomes evident that there's a new kid in town with a new way of operating.

The second thing that holds the story together is the increasing level of hostility and opposition Jesus generates in the scribes and Pharisees: first they question in their hearts; then they question his disciples; and finally, they confront Jesus himself. By the end they are so incensed that they immediately begin to hatch plans to "destroy him." And this resolve hangs like a pall over the story from here on.

Finally, this section is punctuated with pronouncements by Jesus which begin to shed light on what he's really all about: "I, the Son of Man have the authority on earth to forgive sins." "Healthy people don't need a

doctor – sick people do. I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough.” “No one puts new wine into old wineskins,” and “the Sabbath was made to benefit people and not people to benefit the Sabbath. And I, the Son of Man, am master even of the Sabbath!” This last pronouncement is underscored by Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath.

There are, of course, controversies largely over Jewish law, and we need to be careful in how we interpret them. It’s easy to simply take Jesus’ side and dismiss the concerns of his fellow Jews – the Pharisees – for the way in which Jesus is playing fast and loose with the tradition. Such controversies over the law were – and are – the very fabric of Judaism.

The Pharisees, especially the more conservative ones, believed that God had given the law as a means of carving out a sphere of holiness and righteousness on earth. They believed that the very presence of God on earth depended on it. The boundaries the law prescribed between sin and righteousness, clean and unclean, sacred time and space and profane, Jew and Gentile, between physical imperfection and wholeness, could not be breached without profound damage to the social and religious order. Being occupied by the Romans, maintaining order was paramount. These are not trivial concerns. It is important to see the difference between the Pharisees’ vision of God’s will for humanity and that of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel without denigrating

Judaism as a whole.

But, there's no denying that Jesus' words and action pose a threat to the established order of things; he transgresses and subverts these boundaries at every turn, beginning with the healing of the leper which ended Mark's first chapter, fiercely proclaiming that the time has come for a new vision for God's people. The thread running through these controversies is that of human need; for wholeness, for acceptance, for sustenance, for healing. It is much more fundamental to God's will for humanity than maintaining the present, soon to be old, order.

There is a story of a dead church discovering new meaning for the life of their congregation when they came to understand the true meaning of wholeness, acceptance, and healing in a most unusual and perhaps controversial way.

Charlie Stevenson moved to town the day after they voted to close the church. Although he didn't hear about it until he went to worship the following Sunday. The church was almost full that day. It was the beginning of a kind of extended wake which was to last three months. That was when pastor Timmerman was scheduled to retire for the second and last time and the church doors were to be closed for good. He had come to be their pastor after his first retirement from a big city church. The part-time arrangement, the low salary and the provision of a parsonage met both his and the church's needs.

Now with his imminent departure, the ministry of the dwindling congregation seemed to be at an end. They had decided to close the church doors rather than go on with what had become a constant struggle to pay the bills and to carry their share of their denomination's mission work.

Everybody came that first Sunday after the decision to pay their last respects to the old white frame building and to a way of life that had existed in their little community for over a hundred years. It seemed that the church had always been there. It was the only church in the village, the center of community life not only for weddings and funerals but also for Election Day dinners, 4-H club meetings, and numerous other community functions. So everybody came that first Sunday after the vote to mourn the death of their church.

To an outsider that day, it would have appeared that the church was full of life. Charlie Stevenson didn't know quite what to make of it. He had come with the full intention of transferring his membership. The church was within walking distance of his house and it was his denomination. It never occurred to him that he would worship anywhere else. Now what was he going to do? Did it make any sense to join a dying church?

Charlie decided that he would wait and see. In the meantime he could see no reason for not becoming involved in the things he had always done in church.

He asked about Bible study and choir practice, and yes, he would be interested in playing on the church softball team. He liked to play second base but would be glad to fill in wherever there was a spot to fill.

People took to Charlie immediately. People always had. He was a tall man, well over six feet, with broad shoulders, a full head of curly brown hair and a smile that never quit. Charlie seemed to like everyone. And people couldn't help liking him. When word got out that Charlie was coming to choir practice the soprano section doubled. Two eligible young women with modest vocal talents who hadn't been to practice in months suddenly found themselves free of all pressing social engagements. They said they had come for the choir's last hurrah, but they had a hard time keeping their eyes on the music and off of Charlie.

The second week Charlie brought the centre-fielder and the shortstop from the softball team. Everybody knew they were wonderful singers but it was Charlie who had said to them, "Why don't you come sing with us? It is great fun." So they came.

It was the same at the Thursday night Bible Study. Six or seven was the usual attendance. Sometimes they would have nine or ten at the beginning of a series or when they met at Mabel Robinson's house. Mabel was the best dessert maker in town and she had a big Victorian house.

People liked to go there just to see her antique furniture and to ogle the crystal chandelier that her grandfather had shipped over from Paris. Mabel was usually ready for anything, but even she wasn't prepared for the twenty-three people who showed up for Bible Study the second week after Charlie moved to town.

There were the seven regulars, a few of the irregulars, the two newly enthused sopranos, the centerfielder, the shortstop, and the catcher from the team, Charlie, and a few guys who worked with him down at the mill. Mabel had to scramble to find enough chairs for everyone. And she had to sneak out to the store to get extra sherbet to go with the lemon chiffon cake.

The amazing thing was that this sudden rise in attendance at choir practice, at Bible Study and in worship was no passing phenomenon. It grew steadily every week. People were getting involved who hadn't been in church for anything but a dinner – or a Christmas program in years. A couple of families who had been attending a larger church over in the county seat came “back home” to worship “for old time's sake” they said. But everyone could tell they had been caught up in the new spirit too. It was almost enough to make everyone forget the church was about to be closed.

Then near the end of his second month in town Charlie got sick. Word spread that he had a fast spreading cancer. People could hardly believe

it. Charlie, who was so full of life, the man who had almost single-handedly brought the church back to life – dying? It couldn't be true. Mabel and one of the other older women decided to go over and see how he was after the third Sunday that his chair in the choir section was vacant. It was just three weeks before the church was scheduled to close.

They found Charlie in bed, too weak to respond to their knock on the door. Mabel went right in and when she saw the state he was in she sent for the doctor. The doctor wanted him to go to the hospital, but Charlie said he had been through all that before and this time he was going to stay at home. “Well, then,” Mabel said, “You will need a nurse. I will go and get my things.” “Wait just a minute,” Charlie said, “You don't know what you are getting into. You need to know that I have AIDS and that I am gay.”

Mabel didn't know what to say. She was clearly taken aback. She had never in her wildest imaginings thought that she would ever have to face anything like this. Finally, after a long pause, she turned to the doctor and said, “Doc, what do I have to do to protect myself?” After the doctor had told her everything she that had to be done, she went straight home, got her overnight bag, brought her favorite pillow, made a bed on the couch and then set about caring for Charlie's needs. She offered to call his family but Charlie said it would be better if she didn't. He gave her the number though, “just in case,” he said.

Mabel stayed by Charlie's bedside night and day for the next three weeks. She saw to it that no visitor stayed too long. She even chased the pastor out once when she could see that Charlie was getting tired. Charlie died on Memorial Day just before sunrise. When Mabel called his family they said they didn't want anything to do with him. They said, "Charlie made his bed, now let him lie in it." They told her she could make any arrangements she wanted, said Charlie had plenty of money to pay for everything. They didn't even want his things, said to give everything away.

When the word got out that Charlie's family didn't want him, and weren't coming to the funeral, the church took it as a challenge. It didn't matter that Charlie was gay or that he had died of AIDS, he was their Charlie and by God they were going to see that he was buried properly.

Everybody came to the funeral. Pastor Timmerman gave the finest sermon anyone had ever heard him preach. The choir sung like never before and when the men from the softball team carried the casket down the aisle the centre-fielder led the congregation in singing, "Blest Be the Tie That Binds." Tears flowed freely that day. No one who was present had any doubt that "the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above."

The next day after the funeral the bishop got a call from Sam Eberly, the church's Lay Leader. "We've changed our minds," Sam said. "We want to keep the church open."

There are a number of themes in this story about Charlie and the church that was about to close. He is an example of one of those that were ostracized by society, like Levi and the other the tax collectors and sinners that Jesus came to minister to. Mabel, did not care what anyone would say. She was there to serve one of God's children in need. The congregation found new life through service to others, through acceptance, showing love to their neighbour, hospitality, and outreach.

What Jesus' opponents lack, and importantly, later in the Gospel this also comes to include his disciples, is an understanding of what time it is: Jesus begins his ministry in Mark with the proclamation that "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near!" So what's new about Jesus isn't exactly what he's saying and doing. His elevation of concern for human need over ritual observance of the law is a firm part of Israel's tradition: "I hate, I despise your festivals," said the prophet Amos, "but let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," and Hosea said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

So Jesus subverts ritual boundaries not by introducing something completely new, but by drawing on parts of the tradition that are much more in line with what God wants for and from humanity, and by implicitly, and later explicitly, accusing his opponents of maintaining the established boundaries at the expense of human need. Charlie's family set up boundaries which they refused to cross even when Charlie was dying. Like the Pharisees, to them, human need and compassion were

not as important as ritual, boundaries, and outward appearances.

This lack of recognition on the part of Jesus' opponents will have ominous consequences (foreshadowed in his saying about the bridegroom being "taken away") The world's present order is built not around serving human need, but about domination and drawing clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders to preserve power and status. Thus, living in the way Jesus does, and what he calls his followers to do, will inevitably lead to conflict with those powers.

But Mark shows this is not a conflict between the "good" church on one side and "bad" Judaism on the other. More than any other Gospel, he portrays the disciples as also lacking the insight and knowledge necessary to hear and follow Jesus, due to the same fear of such a radical new way of being in the world. They are also blind and deaf, and their own hearts are hardened.

This is Mark's way of turning the spotlight on his audience – on us. The fearful striving for self-preservation that prevents people from crossing boundaries for others is a human problem. Mabel and the congregation, by crossing boundaries discovered new life, a new way of living as God's people. They were rewarded with hope and promise.

Something new is happening! That is Jesus' word to the Pharisees. We are entering a time of discontinuity. The new is incompatible with the old.

You can't put the new wine into old wineskins. What Jesus is about, is unprecedented in Israel. It is startling and unique. Sinners are welcome to the table! Such a thing was unheard of! Let's get it right. What is new is not that God loves sinners. What is new is that God loves sinners without waiting for them to become righteous and deserving. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans: "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." And in appreciation for this love, God expects us to treat our neighbour with love and compassion.

Amen.

**PRAYERS FOR
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
January 14, 2024**

To our God who welcomes all in love, let us pray for the well-being of the church and the concerns of those in need.

God of eternal compassion, who speaks to us through Creation, grant us wisdom to listen to your voice and to be diligent in our care and stewardship of this precious planet. Help us to respect and value our interdependence with your natural Creation and with one another. Even as governments debate the reality of climate change, we hear scientists and climate advocates cautioning about the threat that the changing climate poses to human life. We pray for the well-being of all Creation and for our proper stewardship of the many gifts we receive from You.

We pray for your listening presence for those in the United States, in Japan, in the Scandinavian countries including Norway and Iceland where severe winter storms, mudslides, earthquakes and tornados have destroyed homes and killed family members of those now left behind alone and without a home and many more without power. We pray that you may hear their cry as they also listen for your comforting Spirit.

We pray for our own country, much of which is under extreme weather warnings as the Polar vortex sweeps from the Arctic through the West while a storm swirling up from Texas is wreaking havoc in the East, leaving millions facing snowstorms, power outages and severely cold temperatures. Keep them safe.

O God, as we begin this new year we hope for new beginnings, new opportunities to learn and grow and flourish. Yet, we know that the world continues to be broken and filled with calamities, hardships, conflicts and wars, extreme polarities of political views, extremes of poverty and wealth, the ongoing unravelling of structures and systems, the desecration of your Creation. In the darkness that threatens to

engulf and overwhelm us help us to seek your eternal guiding light of hope and love.

Where people feel lost, isolated and are jaded by contemporary capitalism and consumerism, where self-medication as ways to cope leads to the misuse of alcohol, the poisoning and deaths of lives through the misuse of opioids and other drugs, and gambling is causing hardships and ruin, we pray for the hope of epiphany.

Where some youth and young adults see little prospects in their futures and so contemplate self-harm through drugs or suicide, where the long-term unemployed or working poor consider each new day with few prospects to bring hope, we pray for the light of epiphany.

Your Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to each one of us, compassionate God. Let us use our gifts to care for all who suffer; the homeless and unemployed; those who are ill or in pain, especially those who are suffering in mind, body, or spirit. Strengthen and sustain those who care for the suffering. Strengthen and equip us to be light and hope to those we meet. We pray that God's steadfast love and faithfulness through Christ bring about healing and wholeness.

May we all listen as you listen to all of the worries of our world. We know that you are listening, and yet we still sit in worry. God, we lift up those in our world who especially need to be listened to now ...

Where dictators rule and abuse their power without mercy or wisdom, where democracies are manipulated by the rich and powerful, we pray for the justice of epiphany.

For the people of Palestine and Israel as violence does not cease, and mistrust and misunderstanding continue.

For the people of Ecuador, at one time a very peaceful country, which is now ravaged with violence. We pray for the news broadcast team there that was held hostage. We pray for all of those living in fear of violence and brutality as the government

wages war on gangs. We pray for the people of Taiwan as they experience turmoil with China.

We pray for our leaders, federal, provincial and municipal, that they put the needs of the people, at home and afar, ahead of greed, and self-gratification. Give them wisdom to work collaboratively for the common good of all citizens with a compassionate heart.

We pray for the Church and its leaders: Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, councils, musicians, and lay leaders; that we may continually be inviting others to come and see your goodness. Today we uplift Hills of Peace Lutheran in Kamloops - Rev. Jane Gingrich; our global mission companion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Peru, and our sister congregation, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza.

Where the church dodges its evangelical mission, where the church evades its responsibility to address social, economic and political injustices, forgive us our sins. We pray for the truth of epiphany.

We pray for people of all faiths; that divisions cease and love of neighbour be the guiding principle within our hearts and minds. We pray for all Christian faith traditions that the unity of being the living body of Christ bind us together despite our numerous differences.

We pray for all the saints who have pointed us to you; that their witness may strengthen our own.

Hear our prayer for the fellowship gathered in this place, for the spiritual gifts of each of our members, for those celebrating significant events in their lives, that the Holy Spirit guide us in our work and in our life's journey.

God of every land and nation, you have created all people and you dwell among us in Jesus Christ. Listening God, you listen to every last worry and care. God, may we too listen to you. May our world listen to you. May we spend less time speaking and more time seeking you and

listening for your voice. Listen to the cries of those who pray to you, and grant that, as we proclaim the greatness of your name, all people will know the power of love at work in the world. We ask this through Christ our Light.

Amen

Let us lift the prayer Jesus taught us, saying,

Our Father ...