

8th Sunday after Epiphany
(Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Hosea 2:14-20; Psalm 103:1-13, 22; Mark 2:13-22; II Corinthians 3:1-6

Mark 2:13-22 contains three very short stories – but those stories together paint a picture of the struggle Jesus had in front of him to build the Kingdom of God.

It begins with the story of the call of Levi to join Jesus' disciple band. Levi was a tax-collector. Mark writes, "Jesus went out again beside the sea; 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" (2:13-14).

At first blush, this story seems to be a simple one of Jesus calling a man to follow him. But the text tells us that Levi was "sitting at the tax booth" – or, in other words, was a tax-collector! This piece of information sets up the primary conflict of this and the next two stories.

A tax-collector was a part of the "expendable" class of Israelite society. But unlike anyone else in the expendable class, they were expendable not because of their poverty but because of their position. The expendables were those who didn't fit into Jewish society but were ostracized from it. Some were ostracized because they were "unclean" – that is, had an infectious disease that made them unwanted in society. Others were ostracized because they were destitute – the poorest of the poor. But tax collectors were expendable because they were seen as traitors of the remainder of Jewish society. And even worse, they were traitors simply because of their love of money!

There was probably no person more despised by the Jewish people than the tax-collector. This was because they were the "front-line" representatives of the political and economic elite of both Israel and of Rome, and yet were, at the same time, "ordinary Jews". The tax collectors lived among the people in each village and, in fact, grew up as part of the people, but had chosen to betray the people by being the ones who collected the money that supported the Roman occupation, the land-owners and the clergy aristocracy under which the people were kept in servile conditions. As a reward for their unsavory work, the tax-collectors were permitted to keep a significant percentage of the taxes for themselves; this, in turn, made tax-collectors among the wealthiest people in any village – but also the most despised. Consequently, all the animosity and anger the people felt toward the "Powers that Be" was redirected toward these immediate representatives of those Powers. The people recognized that the other expendables of Israelite society (the widows, orphans, beggars, lepers, destitute) had all fallen into the expendable class by circumstance. But the tax-collector chose his ostracism out of his lust for money and power (no one made him become a tax-collector).

It would make an intriguing study to consider the impact the above community dynamics had upon the person of the tax-collector. It was likely that the tax-collector internalized much self-loathing, for he would recognize that it was his love of money and position that caused him to choose such a reprehensible profession. He would know how greatly he was hated and scorned by the people as a "Benedict Arnold". It was intriguing that, when Jesus called Levi to leave his tax tables and to follow him, the other tax collectors wanted to get together to celebrate Levi's

call (and thus, his escape from this profession). Obviously, they saw Levi as being liberated from their leprous vocation. They, indeed, were the “sick” who needed a physician (5:17) if one were to be truly obedient to the Law and thus love mercy more than sacrifice!

Thus, Jesus calls Levi to “Follow me”! And immediately, without any hesitation or reflection (the sense of the Greek), Levi “got up and followed him”!

That brings us to the second story, and to the introduction of the second group of people with whom Jesus was engaging.

“And as Jesus 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 sitting 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”” (vss. 15-17).

The second group to which the reader is introduced is the Pharisees and their scribes. If the tax-collector was the “front-line” representatives of the political, economic and religious systems of Rome and Israel, the Pharisees and their scribes were the “back-line”! And what a “back-line” they were!

Israel’s clergy aristocracy at the time of Jesus was divided into three groups – the priests, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The priests and Sadducees were centered on the Temple, and both led the liturgical life of Israel and were the Roman government’s voice to the people. But the Pharisees were a unique portion of the religious community. Created out of the national reforms of Nehemiah 400 years earlier, the Pharisees were the operators of Israel’s synagogue system. They were the “dispersed” religious while the priests and Sadducees were Israel’s “gathered” community, centered around Jerusalem and its Temple worship. The Pharisees were dispersed throughout Israel, holding court in each town and village’s synagogue. They were the local teachers (the Pharisees) and adjudicators (the Scribes) of the Law, building in each village a community of those faithfully following the Mosaic Law. But because of their exalted station, they also benefited immensely in prestige, power and wealth both because of their highly-respected position and because of the income that came their way through the tax-collectors. Thus, the Pharisees were both those who “did good” in their communities (and were perceived as the doers-of-good) but who also did quite well!

This religious elite takes offense at Jesus’ association both with Levi and with the “low-life” of his fellow tax-collectors. It is intriguing that this elite depends upon the tax-collectors for most of their income, and yet they both shun them (because they were politically “unclean”) and want Jesus to shun them as well. But Jesus replies, “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” (vs. 17).

In these words, Jesus calls the Pharisees and the Israelite clergy aristocracy to accountability through his call to Levi and his embrace of his tax-collector friends. The clergy elite reject Jesus’ call, but Levi accepts it. Jesus has called Levi and his friends to new life and – in Levi’s

case – a new vocation. Thus, by his words and actions of love and acceptance, and in his call of the elite to accountability according to their own law, Jesus is forming a new community –an alternative community to the religious community of his day. By dispersing to Israel’s villages and towns, the Pharisees were trying to create a community that would knit the nation together under the Law of Moses. But by his words, compassion and actions, Jesus was creating an alternative community – not of obedience to the minutia of Law, but of justice, mercy, and of walking humbly with God. This was a community of the poor, the marginalized, the peasants – yes, even of tax-collectors!

The Pharisees don’t like both what they see happening and how they are being called to accountability for their judgmental attitude. So Mark moves us into his third story. “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they¹ 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” (vss. 18-20).

With this response, Jesus is drawing in the sand a line between his community and the synagogue (Pharisee) community. The community that has come out of the work of John the Baptist has not made as fine a distinction as has Jesus’ community, because it still seeks to conform to all the minutia of the Law and its interpretation; rather, what John has done has been to simply lay down an additional layer – that of baptism for signaling a commitment to doing God’s will. But for Jesus’ community, it is a clean break. It requires the Levi’s of Jesus’ movement to “get up from their tax-table and follow him”; it requires the Simon’s and the Andrew’s to “leave their nets” and become “fishers of people” (Mark 1:16-20). In receiving God’s grace proffered to them, the followers of Jesus must be willing to give up the standards, priorities and lust for power, prestige and wealth that drive all other societies and they are to “marry” themselves to a new “bridegroom”. As does any community, that community will have to form its own disciplines, structures and expectations in order to function, but that date is not yet here. For the moment, the only thing that is expected of the Levi’s who respond to Jesus’ call is to “get up and follow him”. And in doing so, those Levi’s (no matter who they are) will join a table fellowship with their Lord, a wedding banquet that will include, support and sustain them. That is the good news of the Gospel.

Hosea 2:14-20. The prophecy of Hosea is both a very poignant and a powerful prophecy, for it is was lived as well as preached! Hosea married a woman who, although pledging fidelity to him, did not remain faithful. She became pregnant by another man, although Hosea was unaware of her infidelity (1:1-5). By the second pregnancy, however, Hosea was aware of her unfaithfulness, and he consequently named the child “Not Loved” (or “Not Pitied”) (1:6-7). The third child, also illegitimate, Hosea named ”Not My People” (1:8-9). The woman then left

¹ The NRSV states, “and people came and said to him”. But the actual Greek can’t be translated “people”; the Greek word used here is translated “they”. The danger of translating the sentence using the word “people” rather than “they” is that it can be read to suggest that other people (that is, peasants) were coming to Jesus to complain about his disciples not observing the fasting regulations. Bu, in reality, it was the Pharisees making this complaint, and using the word “they” rather than “people” makes that clear!

Hosea and became a prostitute, selling herself for any man's pleasure. Finally debauched and no longer wanted, she was placed on the slave block (2:1-13). There Hosea found her, purchased her, and brought her home with him. She then lived in his home, but their relationship was not completely restored, for she stayed in seclusion "many days" (3:1-5).

The remainder of the book of Hosea (chapters 4 through 14) is a commentary on this heart-breaking story. Hosea pointed out that Israel is like a wife whom Yahweh married. Initially, she was an obedient wife, fulfilling the covenant and assuming the responsibility for which she had been chosen. But then Israel ran away from Yahweh and became a prostitute, lusting after other gods and copying the sensual ways of other nations. Yet Yahweh would still forgive and restore her if she would return. But if not, he would destroy her because of her harlotry.

Hosea wished to show Israel that redemption was possible, though it would not be easy. But was Israel willing to be restored by God? Restoration to Yahweh would only come about by returning to the wilderness (symbolically speaking) where Israel first met Yahweh. A Mount Sinai experience would cause Israel to evaluate itself and its purpose in existence; it would be centered in God and in the covenant, a time of national disciplining. But such a wilderness experience would be a redemptive event, for Israel could restructure its life around obedience to the covenant and begin all over again.

This is what Hosea hoped would happen. But he didn't really believe it would happen! Hosea was convinced that Israel would ignore him and go down to defeat against Assyria. The Israelites would be annihilated from the face of the earth.

Hosea's major contribution to Old Testament theology was his strong emphasis upon God as a God of love. To Hosea, Yahweh was not only the lord and ruler of the nation Israel, but a compassionate father rejected by his children. Few passages of the Old Testament ring with the pathos of Hosea 11:1-12, particularly verse 8: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel?" Yet Yahweh's consuming passion to win back to his love all the people and nations of the world required him to give up on the nation of Israel and replace it with a remnant people, for Israel had failed in its calling and had become a stumbling block to God in God's attempt to reach humankind.

The Old Testament lesson for the Eighth Sunday after Epiphany is within the first section of the book that tells the story of Hosea and his prostituted wife. Hosea 2:14-20 tells of Hosea's decision to bring her back from her obsession, and to do so by wooing her back. "Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt" (2:14-15).

The words are remarkable. Hosea, if he had any response at all, ought to have responded as the cuckolded husband either with rage or with rejection. Instead, he responds with love, with tenderness, with the act of trying to woo her back to himself. Thus, Hosea is implying, God acts the same way towards his people when they reject him. He has every right to act with anger and

with punishment, but instead, he says, “I will now allure her, speak tenderly to her, and give her her vineyards” (i.e., financially reward her). This is indeed a God of extreme grace!

There is, in this passage, a magnificent historical reference done as a play on words that today’s reader would totally miss but would have been a very touching statement for the first Hebrews that heard this prophecy! Hosea writes, “(God) will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope”. The Valley of Achor was the broad plain near Jericho where Achan stole some of the booty taken by the Israelites in their invasion of Canaan under Joshua. God exposed the subterfuge which had taken place and the people executed Achan. Only then was the nation cleansed and they conquered the city that had previously defeated them and had arrested their conquest of the Promised Land (Josh. 7). The name, *emeq akor* means, in Hebrew, “Valley of Trouble” – which was precisely what it was! But now, God says, Israel’s “valley of trouble” will become *petakh tiquah*, the “Door of Hope”! Thus, as Israel was restored to God’s favor as a result of their punishment of Achan, so Israel will be restored now to relationship with God through the action of God’s grace!

This statement by Hosea now moves clearly from Hosea and his wife to God and his wife, Israel. “On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Ba’al”. For I will remove the names of the Ba’als from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (2:16-20).

There are two remarkable emphases made in these few verses. First, Hosea says that Yahweh instructs the harlot-bride, Israel “you will call me ‘my husband’ and no longer ‘my Ba’al’, and I will remove the names of the Ba’als from your mouth”. What does Hosea mean by this obscure comment? Ba’al, of course, was the alternate deity to Yahweh who was worshipped by the people of the Fertile Crescent. He was a storm god of power, wealth and sexuality, one who was the “lord” over all, personified in the power, wealth and sexuality of the king (in fact, a device was worn by many kings to keep their penises in apparent erection as a symbol that they were “father” of their country). Hosea is saying here that Israel is to relate to Yahweh in a new way; she is to see him as “my husband” (the one who protects me, loves and cherishes me) rather than as “my Ba’al” – a lord of power, wealth and dominance. Hosea is inviting Israel to an authentic loving relationship with God!

Thus, Hosea continues, “I (God) will remove the name of the Ba’als from her mouth and they shall be mentioned by name no more” (vs. 17). The Hebrew word translated “remove” has the sense of “cut out” to it; that is, the name of the Ba’als will be eliminated from even the capacity of Israel to name his name. Thus, what had been commanded in the Law of Moses (Exod. 23:32; Deut. 12:3) had now been ordered by God – that Israel’s redemption required their purification so that the very name of other gods would be cleansed from their mouths!

Hosea then continues by describing what God will do and what Israel will be expected to do for them to have the kind of working covenant with each other that will allow Israel to call God “my

husband” and to dismiss from their life together as a nation all other gods. The text does so by once again using the word to “cut” (translated “make” in verse 18). To “cut” a covenant was the normal way the Old Testament described the process of making covenant between two parties – whether it was God and Israel or between one human and another.

The “cutting” of the covenant is done in Hosea by presenting three actions that both God and Israel are expected to do. First, God will include in this covenant “the wild animals, the birds of the air and the creeping things of the ground”. Second, humanity will “abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land”, as their unique contribution to the covenant. In other words, both God and humanity will do their respective parts to build a society of shalom! God will bring order in the natural world. And Israel is to bring order in their political and economic worlds!

That this is the intent of Hosea’s covenant is made plain in the closing statement that summarizes that covenant. “I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord” (vss. 19-20). Hosea has summarized the relationship that God intends between God’s self and Israel (or, in other words, humanity) in a similar way as did Micah. “He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). This is the Old Testament summary of the shalom society: the creation of one community that is committed to “righteousness and justice”, both economically and politically for all its people, a society in which everyone loves each other “steadfastly” and “in mercy”, a society in which one lives in faithfulness with God, “my husband”!

Psalm 103 is one of the grandest psalms within the Psalter. The canvass that it is painted upon is so broad, it cannot be fully appreciated at any one sitting.

Psalm 103 is essentially a hymn of thanksgiving for God’s goodness. But to say that it is a hymn is like saying that a Rolls Royce is a car or the Queen Mary (I or II) is a boat!

It begins, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits” (103:1-2).

The Psalmist then lists all that God has done for us. He has forgiven us, he has worked in our lives and in our midst as his people, he has brought healing and wholeness to our pain and struggle, he has delivered us from the threat of death, he blesses us with *chesedh* love and his continuing mercy, he has brought meaning, purpose and satisfaction to our lives.

But not only has God been good to us as individuals or even as a people. God has been the liberator of the poor and oppressed. And this was never made more clear than in his rescue of Israel from Egyptian slavery and his creation of these former slaves into a new nation – Israel! “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” (vss. 6-7). Further, God not only worked in our past; he continues to work every bit as powerful in our present. “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (vs. 8).

The reality is, the Psalmist declares, that God is a God of grace. Whether it is that God has worked in our past when we were an enslaved people, whether he works in our present as we seek to build God's shalom community, whether he works through the beauty and power of his creation, whether he works through his continuing care of us as he provides healing, wholeness, meaning and purpose to our lives – whatever it is that he does, God is a God of *chesedh* or steadfast, never wavering, grace-filled love! There is much in us that ought to either provoke his anger or give him intense disappointment. But he doesn't dwell on such things. Rather he forgives and keeps on loving us. "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (vs. 10).

The Psalmist then presents several images to describe God's *chesedh* love for us. "As far as the heavens are high above the earth," so high above our love is God's love for us (vs. 11). "As far as the east is from the west," so far is his removal of our sins from us (vs. 12). "As a father has compassion for his children," so God has compassion for us (vs. 12). So he exercises this great, sustaining, continuous, forgiving love toward us. And he does that because "he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust" (vs. 14).

Then comes the most poignant note of the psalm. This author is likely an old man, so from the vantage point of his many years, he reflects on how short our lives truly are and contrasts that with the continuing love of God for us. As I write from the reality of 72 years of age, this passage has become my favorite part of this psalm because it so resonates with me.

"As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children – to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments" (vss. 15-18).

The Psalm then ends in a paean of praise to God, for there can be no other response in the light of the majesty, power and continuing love he has for us:

"Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will. Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul" (vss. 20-22)!

II Corinthians 3:1-6 is a reference to a Roman custom of the first century. "We (that is Paul) do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (vss. 1-3).

It was the custom throughout the Roman Empire for a letter of commendation to be written from one person to another whom the writer knew in order to commend or credential the person who was the subject of that letter. Two such letters are referred to in the New Testament, one written by Paul to the Church at Rome to introduce Phoebe, a member of the Church at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1-2), the other written by Israel's high priest to commend Paul (who was then

named Saul) to the synagogue in Damascus so that the synagogue could be used as a base for persecuting the Christians (Acts 9:2). So this was a common practice at the time.

Apparently, because of the party spirit in the Church in Corinth (“I am of the party of Apollos”, “I am of the party of Paul”, “I am of the party of Peter” – I Cor. 1:10-12), church members were now requiring letters of commendation for any outsider who came into their midst. Likely, some wags in the church had the temerity to ask Paul for a letter of commendation – and he was incensed! After all, he was the founder of this church! And he had led most of them to a relationship with Christ! Letter of commendation? How dare they be so insolent?

Then, it occurred to Paul how to counter this outrageous (and very insulting) demand. “**You** are our letter of commendation”, he writes, “not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts”! It is a brilliant retort!

Paul continues. “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (vss. 4-6).

Paul realized that his umbrage could be misconstrued. Those making the demand for a letter of commendation from their church’s founder, first pastor and the one who had led them to Christ (recognizing how insulting their request was) could now react to his response that the church itself was his letter of commendation. They could accuse Paul of self-praise, of thinking more highly of himself than he was justified to think. Therefore, Paul moves quickly to dissuade any such argument.

Paul makes it clear that, although it was his privilege to found the Corinthian church and win people to Christ as its first pastor, what he had accomplished had not been his own work but was the work of God. It was God who did the real work, simply using Paul as a vehicle to accomplish that work. Thus, rather than boasting, “See what I have done”, Paul was declaring, “Praise God for the work that God has done in our midst! And God did this work, not by continuing the old (Jewish) covenant of a written Law, but of making a new covenant with us within each of us and in our midst, a covenant “of the Spirit”. “For”, Paul concludes, “the letter (even a written letter of commendation) kills, but the Spirit (the work that God does within and among us) gives life”. This is the investment that God has made in the Corinthian Church and its members. And Paul was simply privileged to be its messenger!

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