

Hear the Good News of Salvation

Mark 2:13-17

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Curley, one of three stooges, was involved in yet another of his epic conflicts. He was having an argument about a very important issue...well, maybe not so important, but Curly was arguing with someone over a matter, maybe just a trivial matter. But Curly and his opponent were going at it full blast and reaching no agreement. Finally, Curly knelt down and drew a line in the sand, and he dared his opponent to cross over the line. Me, all of six or seven years of age, watched with keen interest, holding my breath, to see how this dramatic confrontation would be resolved. Would Curly's opponent cross the line, and if he dared to do so such a bold thing, how would the conflict escalate? The opponent crossed the line. And Curly responded...by throwing his arm around the shoulder of his former opponent and saying, "Neyyyy...now you're on my side." Knyuck, knyuck, knyuck...

Who would have thought Curly would have something to say about a story in the Bible? But here we have a story in the Bible, and a line is drawn in the sand. When the line is drawn in the sand, how will people respond? The call of Levi, found in Mark 2:13-17, is a story about a line being drawn in the sand. We don't find out the resolution to the story in these few short verses. Nevertheless, the line in the sand that we find in the call of Levi presents us with a challenging question of where we stand in regard to the line in the sand.

The story is really quite amazing, in that a tax collector named Levi hears Jesus say, "Follow me," and he leaves his tax booth and follows Jesus. Levi left a lot. A tax collector, by virtue of the way the system was set up, had the opportunity to exploit his position and gain quite a bit of financial wealth. The tax collector gained such wealth at the expense of those who were taxed, and so it is easy to understand why tax collectors were despised. They collected taxes from the Jewish people on behalf of Rome, the all-powerful empire, and in the meantime, as they leaned hard on their fellow Jews, they lined their own pockets. That tax collectors were despised is not very surprising. That a tax collector named Levi would hear Jesus say, "Follow me" and obey him, at the cost of his highly profitable business, now that is surprising.

Levi not only follows Jesus, they have dinner together. One commentator points out the Greek wording in this story leaves it up in the air as to whether Jesus invites Levi into his house to have dinner...dinner in the home of Jesus...or Levi invites Jesus to have dinner in his house. We know from the reaction that either way it upset the righteous people in this story, the teachers of the law who are identified as Pharisees. Can you imagine if Levi and his crew of fellow tax collectors and sinners all congregated in the home of Jesus? That would be an interesting congregation, to say the

least. The New International Version, which I am reading from, chooses to follow the path that tells us Levi has Jesus over. Either way, Jesus is made vulnerable to the question that is more accusation than inquiry, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

When Jesus responds to this accusatory question, his response draws a line in the sand. On one side of the line are those who are healthy and on the other, those who are sick. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Then he draws the line again. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” There it is. The line in the sand. On one side the righteous and the healthy, on the other side the sick and the sinners.

I’m not used to thinking of Jesus drawing lines in the sand. My vision of Jesus is that he does just the opposite. I think of Jesus including, not excluding. I think of Jesus erasing lines, tearing down, as we read in Ephesians 2, tearing down walls of hostility. And yet here he is drawing a line in the sand. Healthy and righteous on one side of the line, sick and sinners on the other. And Jesus is on the side of the sick and sinners.

If the sick and sinners are on one side of the line with Jesus, who is on the other? Who is on the side of the healthy and the righteous? The Disciple Bible Study that we are working through on Tuesdays and Wednesday identifies several of the groups that were active and alive in the days of the New Testament, groups that would have been on the side of the line that included the healthy and the righteous. Mark has referred to a group called the Pharisees, and they did make a concerted effort to live a righteous life. They were separatists in the sense that they kept apart from actions and people that were considered sinful, unclean, or unrighteous. In their defense, they were doing just what they thought scripture instructed, instructions found in passages such as Psalm 1. “Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers...” The Pharisees kept away from the wicked, the sinners, and the ones who mocked God and God’s ways. Another group, even more conservative than the Pharisees was the Essenes. The Essenes are described as being, “Radically righteous...rigid and legalistic.”¹ Some think it was a branch of the Essenes that completely gave up on religious life in Israel and withdrew to form a separate community, the Qumran Community, which is the community that preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls. A more liberal group than the Pharisees was the Sadducees, who assimilated into much of the Greek and Roman culture. The ones who were on the other side of the line from Jesus were not monolithic, they were conservative, some more conservative, and others less conservative, and yet this much is true of all of them. Together, all of them made a judgment about tax collectors and sinners, and that judgment was that the tax collectors and sinners were not to be included.

¹ Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study, p. 139.

And here comes Jesus, drawing a line in the sand and standing on the opposite side from the righteous ones, throwing his lot in with the sinners and tax collectors. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” While recognizing that Jesus draws a line in the sand, I am still not convinced his purpose is to be exclusive. When Jesus looked at those on the other side of the line, the Pharisees and Sadducees and Essenes, the Levites and teachers of the law, when he saw them on the other side of the line, I think it is not only possible, but very probable, that Jesus might have said to them, “Hey, do you want to cross the line and be on our side?” You are welcome. Just come on. We would love to have you on our side of the line.

Or, if that isn't agreeable, how about this, we will all come over to your side of the line. I would be glad to bring the sinners and the tax collectors to your house, to your community, to your life. All you have to do is welcome them...to welcome us. When you put it in these terms, we begin to see who the exclusive ones really are, don't we? The righteous don't want anything to do with the sinners and tax collectors. They are not going to cross the line and join Jesus and the sinners and tax collectors, and they would never consider inviting the sinners and tax collectors to cross the line and come into their lives, into their community, into their homes.

Maybe that is why Jesus chooses to be on the side of the line with the sinners and tax collectors. Jesus came so that people might find a place of belonging in the kingdom of heaven, and if the righteous have drawn a line, saying we are in and you, you sinners and tax collectors are out, then Jesus will take a place on the side of the line with the sinners and tax collectors.

Who is on the right side of the line and who is on the wrong side? This might present a fine debate, an interesting theological dilemma...except for one thing. God already settled that debate. God already weighed in on that dilemma. There is this story from the Old Testament about a prophet named Jonah and a place called Nineveh. Nineveh was every bit as despised as tax collectors and sinners, and more so. They were the sworn enemies of the people of God, the Israelites. Nineveh was the capitol city of Assyria, the nation that attacked Israel and led to the downfall of the northern kingdom. God drew a line in the sand and said Nineveh wicked. Then he sent the prophet Jonah to Nineveh to tell them they were wicked, and because of their wickedness they were going to be judged. Nineveh was on the wrong side of the line. That much was clear. But then Nineveh heard the word of the Lord, they prayed, they fasted, and they turned from their wicked ways. And God forgave them. He erased the line of judgment. The people of Nineveh were no longer on the wrong side of the line.

When the “righteous” ones saw Jesus with Levi and his friends, they saw Jesus with a group of tax collectors and sinners. What they failed to see is that there is movement in this story. Levi is no longer sitting at his tax booth. He has left the tax booth. More importantly, he has followed Jesus. Jesus did not come so that people would be the same as they had been. Jesus came to bring a new normal. Levi’s life is changing right before our eyes. That is what Jesus called people to do. The first words we hear Jesus say in the Gospel of Mark are, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” The movement we see in this story represents repentance. The movement represents change in the life of Levi. He leaves his tax booth. He follows Jesus. His life shows real change. And if the story immediately before the calling of Levi has any relation to the story of Levi, the story where Jesus heals a paralyzed man as a sign that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, then we are witnessing a story that speaks not only of repentance and discipleship, but also a story that speaks of forgiveness.

This story clearly shows there is a line in the sand, a line that separates the righteous from the sinners and tax collectors. Jesus crosses that line to bring the good news to sinners and tax collectors. When sinners and tax collectors hear the good news, when they repent, when they accept Jesus, when they follow Jesus, when they leave their past behind, when they experience forgiveness, that line in the sand is erased. And yet this stubborn line persists because there are righteous ones who will not accept that the line has been erased. There are some who insist on calling Levi and his friends “tax collectors and sinners.” For them the line in the sand remains.

The fact that the line in the sand remains for the ones who would consider themselves righteous is a bit of a problem. It turns out God has weighed in on this matter as well. Once again we find that the place God weighed in was the Old Testament. And he did it numerous times. In the prophet Hosea God spoke to the people of Israel in the 11th chapter to lament that even though God chose Israel, delivered Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, led them through the desert, led them to the Promised Land, despite all this Israel turned away from God. Israel was not righteous. In Hosea God points a finger at Israel and says, “You are not righteous.” In Isaiah, God points a finger at Israel and says, “You are not righteous.” In Jeremiah, in Ezekiel, in the minor prophets, God points the finger. The psalms put it clearly, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away.” (Psalms 14 and 53, as quoted in Romans 3:10, 11)

There is a line in the sand separating sinners from the righteous. But in the eyes of God, there is no one on the side that is righteous. So what does God do? That is the beauty of the prophetic books in the Old Testament. God erases the line. God shows compassion. Read Hosea 11 and you find a movement from a line in the sand, from judgment, to mercy and grace and love. Read the prophet Isaiah and you will see a God who chooses to cross the line separating the righteous and sinners, sending a suffering servant in Isaiah 53 who will bear the sins of God's people and make intercession for their transgressions, for their sins. There is a line in the sand and Jesus clearly crosses it. He who is righteous crosses the line and comes on the side of the sinner. This is not cause for judgment and accusation and criticism and exclusion. This is cause for celebration. This is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus has dinner in the home of Levi, surrounded by Levi's many friends, it is more than a dinner. It is a preview of a great banquet in heaven when people will come from east and west and north and south to sit together at table in the kingdom. Abraham, the one who would be a blessing to all nations must be sitting back and smiling as he watches the line in the sand being erased. Paul, who knew so well the power of sin and the presence of sin in each one of us and in all of us, and who believed so passionately that the sin of this world had been overcome in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus must have heard this story of Levi and his fellow sinners and given a heartfelt Amen! While we were still sinners Christ showed his love for us...he showed that love by crossing the line that was drawn in the sand. Erasing the line, that took more than just sitting in a home and having a meal. Mark will get us to that, to the time when Jesus speaks of giving his life as a ransom, to the story of the suffering and death and the cross and the grave...but for today we simply learn this amazing and wonderful bit of good news. There is a line in the sand and Jesus crosses over it. He is the friend of sinners and tax collectors.

The issue of the righteous and the sinners is not resolved in our story today. There is still a line in the sand. The righteous are on one side and the sinners are on the other. For those who insist on calling themselves the righteous, for those who question Jesus, and indeed accuse Jesus, here is a little story that cautions us against judging others.

There was a meeting among members of a religious order about a brother who had sinned. The Fathers spoke, but Abba Pior kept silence. Later, he got up and went out; he took a sack, filled it with sand and carried it on his shoulder. He put a little sand also into a small bag which he carried in front of him. When the Fathers asked him what this meant, he said, "In this sack which contains much sand, are my sins, which are many; I have put them behind me so as not to be troubled about them and so as not to weep; and see here are the little sins of my brother which are right in front of

me and I spend my time judging them. This is not right. I ought rather to carry my sins in front of me and concern myself with them, begging God to forgive me for them” The Fathers stood up and said, “Truly, this is the way of salvation.”²

And for those who find themselves on the wrong side of the line, for those of us who are acutely aware that our lives bear the scars of sin and the pain of brokenness, for those of us here today who recognize that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, I offer a little poem that has made a huge difference in my life and in the life of many who have sat on the wrong side of the line and wondered if there was any hope, if there was a future, if there could be forgiveness, if there could be love, if there could be a new beginning. It is a poem that begins like this...

*It was battered and scarred,
And the auctioneer thought it
hardly worth his while
To waste his time on the old violin,
but he held it up with a smile.*

*"What am I bid, good people", he cried,
"Who starts the bidding for me?"
"One dollar, one dollar, Do I hear two?"
"Two dollars, who makes it three?"
"Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three,"*

*But, No,
From the room far back a gray bearded man
Came forward and picked up the bow,
Then wiping the dust from the old violin
And tightening up the strings,
He played a melody, pure and sweet
As sweet as the angel sings.*

*The music ceased and the auctioneer
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said "What now am I bid for this old violin?"
As he held it aloft with its' bow.*

*"One thousand, one thousand, Do I hear two?"
"Two thousand, Who makes it three?"
"Three thousand once, three thousand twice,
Going and gone", said he.*

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 337, 338.

*The audience cheered,
But some of them cried,
"We just don't understand."
"What changed its' worth?"
Swift came the reply.
"The Touch of the Masters Hand."*

*And many a man with life out of tune
And battered and scarred with sin
Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd
Much like that old violin*

*A mess of pottage, a glass of wine,
A game and he travels on.
He is going once, he is going twice,
He is going and almost gone.*

*But the Master comes,
And the foolish crowd never can quite understand,
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the Touch of the Masters' Hand.³*

³ Myra Brooks Welch, "The Touch of the Master's Hand"