

WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT?
Mark 2:13-17
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Bobby Lee loves ribs. One day he heard about a restaurant that had amazing ribs, so he and a bunch of his friends drove fifty minutes to get there. The place was packed, and the food was great. It was "all you can eat rib night," and rib bones were piling up as fast as the line to get in.

Eating ribs is messy business. Barbecue sauce gets on your face, fingers, and clothes; dirty napkins pile up next to half-eaten bowls of baked beans and cole slaw. When Bobby and his crew had eaten all they could eat, they paid their tab and waddled out to the car.

That's when Bobby reached into his pocket for his keys and came up with nothing but lint. Starting to feel panicked, he looked through the window at the ignition hoping that he'd locked the keys in the car. But in the back of his mind a more disgusting possibility was taking shape. When he saw that the ignition was empty, he knew exactly where his keys were—the keys to his car, his house, and his office. Only seconds earlier, those precious keys had slid right off his tray and followed a half-eaten corn cob and several bones to the bottom of a trash can. He had thrown away his keys at a restaurant on "all you can eat rib night."

His friends certainly weren't going to do his dirty work for him. So he dove in. He fished through bones, beans, barbecue, corn, cake, cole slaw, and a host of saliva-soaked napkins. A shiny layer of trashcan slime had coated his arms before he finally grasped hold of those precious keys.

As Bobby searched for his keys, he said he began to see a parallel in his relationship with God. He says, "I began to think about our dumpster-diving God. And I mean no disrespect by calling him that. On the contrary, I now have a deeper appreciation and adoration for the infinite God who left a pristine, holy, sinless heaven to search through the filth and rubbish of this fallen world for something precious to him: me. (Adapted from a story found on-line at preachingtoday.com)

You are precious to God. And God will go to great lengths to look for you and to call you back to him, no matter where you are or what you're doing. It doesn't matter if you're part of the "in crowd" or the "out crowd" . . . Jesus doesn't care about your credentials. He cares about you.

Let's take a look at our text today in the Gospel according to Mark.

Mark 2:13-17 . . .

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors, and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

We find Jesus walking by the lakeside and teaching. This was a very common way for rabbis to teach. They would walk the roads from one place to another, and their disciples would group around them and walk with them, listening as they talked. Jesus was doing what any rabbi of his day might have done.

And as he walked along he noticed Levi. From reading this story in the Gospel of Matthew, we learn that Levi was also called Matthew. And Jesus called out to him and said, "Come, follow me."

Notice how Jesus never missed an opportunity to invite someone back into relationship with God. Here he was teaching, surrounded by a crowd of people, but he still noticed Matthew out on the fringes.

And just who was Matthew? We're told that he was a tax-collector, although a more accurate translation would be toll-collector. He ran a tollbooth on the road to the Mediterranean Sea and collected a transportation tax, rather similar to an import tariff, on all goods for trade passing on the road.

The Romans knew something about economics, for they set up an incentive system that was guaranteed to provide a specific amount of income. Tax collectors had to give a certain amount regularly to the Roman authorities, regardless of the amount of traffic that traveled on the road. If they didn't collect enough, the collector had to cover the difference from his own pocket; but if he collected more, he could keep all of the excess. The collectors clearly wanted to collect as much as possible, leading to obvious opportunities for corruption.

Even in our society, tax collectors are not well loved. However, we have depersonalized the tax collection process a bit. We send our taxes to a government agency and thus any anger or frustration is directed against an organization instead of a particular person.

But imagine, if instead of receiving net income each month, you were paid your gross salary in cash. So you would go to your boss' accountant, get your salary in cash, and then right next to the accountant stands the tax collector. So you receive your money, and then immediately have to give 1/4 or 1/3 or 1/2 to this tax collector. Even if there is no corruption, the tax collector is unlikely to be your favorite person.

But for Jews in first century Palestine the tax collector's position was even worse. Not only were tax collector's taking money from Jewish businessmen, hurting local business; not only were they corrupt, taking more than they had a right to by law; but they were also agents of a foreign government. They were working for the oppressors! So, for Jews, Levi Matthew was one of the most despised men in all of Galilee.

But this day, Jesus passes Matthew's tollbooth on the way to preach by the Sea of Galilee. He looks Matthew in the eye and says, "You follow me! You, Levi, leave your tax collecting; *I want you* to follow me."

Jesus called Levi! Not the scribes or the Pharisees. Not the religious authorities. Not another farmer or fisherman, but the most despised person of his day: a cheating agent of a foreign oppressor. Jesus called a tax collector to be one of his disciples. (Ideas for previous paragraphs taken from notes of a sermon preached at Community Bible Church in Williamstown, MA on 6/27/99 by Thomas C. Pinckney.)

Would you have done the same? Would you have picked Matthew to be on your discipleship team? The story doesn't tell us how the other disciples reacted to Matthew joining their ranks. Raised eyebrows? Muttered comments behind his back? Incredulous shock? I doubt if they walked right up to him, held out their hand, and said, "This is great, Matthew! Don't know why Jesus didn't ask you sooner! Didn't I just tell him the other day, 'Jesus, we really need a tax collector on the team to balance out the ranks'."

For those of you who attended public school, go back for a moment to some of the poignant memories of gym class. Two people were appointed captains of the kickball teams, and then each captain got to choose, one at a time, who would be on his team. First, all the team captain's friends got chosen. Then all the jocks. Then all the semi-jocks. And the selection when on and on until it was wheedled down to the least un-coordinated, un-athletic type kids.

Now, which of you some times got to be a team captain?

Which of you were always one of the last kids picked?

Deciding who's in and who's out is part of our sinful human nature. Even as kids we know how to play the game. So, of course, we carry it over into our adult lives, even into our Christian fellowships.

Do you ever try and decide who's in and who's out when it comes to God's Kingdom. A wealthy person walks in the door of Crossroads and you're suspicious about his motives. "Does he really believe in Christ or just want to feel good about giving money away?" A poor family walks in the door and you think, "They're just here for a free ride. Another handout." A Buddhist walks in the door and you groan, "Not another person who's going to spout off about spiritual enlightenment and multiple pathways to God." We are quite apt at judging people from every angle: education, social standing, economics, spiritual journeys, race, sex, professional connections . . . we're very good at standing in for God to decide who's in and who's out.

But Jesus had a different set of standards. All throughout the New Testament, he never does what's expected. He was constantly choosing to associate with people that the "in crowd" of his day, thought were "outsiders."

And so he calls Matthew, "Hey, come on! I want you on my team!" And Matthew joyfully accepts. In fact, he appears not to even hesitate. Think about that for a minute. Of all the disciples Jesus called, Matthew would have had to give up the most, at least professionally.

Peter, James, Andrew and John could all go back to fishing if this "Jesus thing" didn't work out. There were always fish to catch. But Matthew, upon leaving his job as a toll-booth collector, burned his bridges completely. These kind of jobs didn't come around every day. You only got them through political-family connections. But Matthew left it all behind in an instant. Perhaps indicative that wealth and prestige with the Roman government weren't meeting the deep needs of his heart. But looking across the crowd into Jesus' eyes, he knew immediately that with this man, he could be everything God created him to be.

In fact, Matthew is so excited at joining Jesus' team; he throws a party so that all his friends can meet Jesus. Now, as you might imagine, Matthew's friends are not the cream of society. Being an outcast himself, his friends are also outcasts, from the fringes of society. But just as Matthew didn't hesitate to follow Jesus, neither does Jesus hesitate to dine with Matthew and meet his friends. The Pharisees found this contemptible. They accused Jesus of being with the "wrong" crowd. As a rabbi he wasn't following proper etiquette procedure. He was making himself 'unclean' in every sense of the word.

And Jesus responds quite clearly that his purpose is not to minister to those who are right with God, but to reach out to those who are lost, who are hurting, who have been disenfranchised from the Kingdom of God. Holiness is not about the outward appearance of people, but it's about matters of the heart. What's inside a person. Basically, he says to the Pharisees, "You may think these people are not worthy of

entering God's Kingdom, but I'm here to tell you that they are. So move over! In God's eyes they can sit at the table right next to you!"

Do you worry too much about who's in and who's out? Do you worry too much if *you're* in or *you're* out? Or do you see people through the eyes of Jesus, and respond with your heart?

A youth minister named Tony was working on a retreat for the kids in his church. He'd been planning and strategizing until 2am, and had hit a brick wall in his thinking. So he decided that he needed a break. He went down the street to a local diner that was open all night and got a cup of coffee. While he there, three men came in. Three bums actually. And one of them said to the others in a half-drunk voice, "Tomorrow's my birthday." One of the other guys said, "So what?" And they had a cup of coffee and left.

After they left, Tony said to the waiter, "Those guys come in here all the time?" The waiter answered, "Yeah, every night around two o'clock. They have some kind of crummy watchman's job at the factory." So Tony said to the waiter, "I overheard the guy say it's his birthday tomorrow. What do you say? He'll be here around two o'clock tomorrow morning—let's throw him a party." The waiter, somewhat astonished, said, "Okay. Why not!"

So Tony got some decorations, and he got some kids and their families from his church, he ordered a big birthday cake, and they spread the word around. At two o'clock the next morning, the three bums came in, and lo and behold, the diner was filled with people! And they sang "Happy Birthday" to Rob.

Rob was so overcome when they presented him with the cake that he was speechless for a moment. Then he collected himself and asked if he could take the cake home instead of eating it there. He wanted to take it home and look at it. No one had ever given him a birthday cake before in his life.

After the party was over, the waiter leaned his elbow on the counter and looked across at Tony. "I bet you belong to some church." Tony smiled and said, "I belong to the church that throws parties for bums at two o'clock in the morning." The waiter looked at him and responded, "If I could find such a church, I'd join it today." (page 268, "The Birthday Party" from *A World of Stories* by William J. Bausch)

Our Gospel story today allows us to examine ourselves in two crucial ways this morning:

First, who are we excluding from a relationship with Jesus? Who has God placed in our life that we need to call towards Jesus . . . only we've been saying:

He's too educated, why would he listen to me?

She's too cynical. I'm tired of trying.

He's too rich. Rich people have no interest in Jesus.

She's too poor. She needs food before she'll listen about Jesus.

He's works for the government. He's too corrupt to understand the gospel.

Are you trying to be God and decide who's in and who's out? What if someone had done that with you? What if someone had left you out. Would you even be sitting here today?

Every one of us has at least one person in our lives that needs a relationship with Jesus. Pray that God will use you with authenticity and integrity in that person's life.

Second, not only does this passage call us to look at ourselves as individuals, but also as a community. Jesus does not need a new generation of Pharisees running the church! Do we, as the community called Crossroads, welcome every person that comes through our doors, no matter who they are, or what they do? Do we truly validate those who are coming, thirsting for God? Are we ready with the cup of living water? Or do we pre-judge them before they even take a chair and sit down?

Honestly, I think we are doing fairly well on loving people, at helping them to feel welcomed. But we can get complacent. We can build our little circle of friends and forget to reach out to the new person. We can develop an "in crowd" that excludes others without even being totally conscious of it. So this story is a good wake-up call as a community. Are you having significant conversations with the new people that walk through the doors? Are you making it a point to develop a friendship with someone you don't know very well, but that has been here multiple times?

Who's in and who's out?

Jesus had relationships with every kind of person, in every aspect of society. All his friends didn't come from inside the church. He was walking and talking and teaching everywhere he went. He was making the outsiders, insiders.

As one of his modern-day-disciples, are you doing the same?

Let's pray . . .