

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS

(4) JESUS AND THE EXCLUDED

Luke 5:27-32

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SCRIPTURE

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." ²⁸And he got up, left everything, and followed him. ²⁹Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ³¹Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³²I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:27-32 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to [Jesus'] disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (Lk 5:30).

Both Jesus and the religious leaders of his day believed that God had a purpose for their lives. The religious leaders believed that their purpose was to gain rewards for being righteous. Jesus believed his purpose was to help those who knew they were not righteous. Consequently, the religious leaders separated themselves from those whom they regarded as "sinners" whereas Jesus spent a great deal of his time with the very people the religious leaders tried to avoid. Jesus did not concern himself with how people looked or smelled or whether they were accepted by society.

A young pastor was asked to perform a grave site service in an unusual location. He got the directions mixed up and was terribly late. When he got to the site no one was there except two guys and the concrete cover had already been placed. Being a faithful minister he decided to do his duty and complete the funeral. He preached for about 15 minutes, closed his Bible and prayed. As he left the site he heard one man say to the other, "You know, I have been putting in septic tanks for 25 years and I have never seen anything like that."

The two kinds of "septic tank" characters mentioned in our passage from Luke (5:27-32) are sinners and tax collectors. The term "sinner" *can* refer to someone who is in

desperate need of forgiveness from God, but in Jesus' day the word was used by Pharisees to describe either Gentiles (non-Jews), or ordinary Jews who did not keep all the religious regulations.

Tax collectors collected taxes for the Roman Empire. Chief tax collectors would bid for the right to collect taxes from a certain region. The amount was never reported to the general population and the chief tax collector could pocket as profit any amount he collected over and above what he owed to Rome. This system lent itself to abuse, although much of that abuse was cleaned up by the time our story takes place.

Chief tax collectors would hire others to do the actual labor. These were often poor Jews desperate for work. But even these tax collectors were regarded as outcasts and traitors by their fellow Jews. One such despised tax collector was named Levi (also known as Matthew). It seems to have been Levi's responsibility to collect tolls from caravans that were using the great road from Syria to Egypt as well as duties on transported goods.

The attitude of Christ towards tax collectors, as well as other despised classes, was that of an uplifting sympathy. He invited Levi to be his disciple and even chose him as one of his twelve apostles.

The Pharisees were the most influential religious party in Palestine, although they never numbered more than six thousand. The name "Pharisee" means "separated one" and they were highly critical of Jesus for not being a separatist, that is, for failing to observe their pious distinction between "the righteous" (they themselves) and "the sinners."

In response to the criticism, Jesus says:

"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 to repentance" (5:31-32).

So Jesus came not to call the "righteous" (a somewhat sarcastic way to refer to those who are self-righteous) but "sinners" (that is, all those who are alienated from the life of God). Jesus' call is a call to salvation; and, in order to share in it, a person must recognize the need. The irony of this story is that the religious leaders were in just as much need of Jesus' help as anyone else.

This story about Jesus with "tax collectors and sinners" is not unique to Luke. It is also found in Matthew (9:10-17) and Mark (2:15-22). But throughout his Gospel, Luke places a far greater emphasis on Jesus' ministry to the excluded than do the other Gospels. For Luke, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a universal message, a message for all

people.

Luke reveals to us a Jesus who is the friend of outcasts. He is the only one who tells of a woman of ill-repute who anointed Jesus' feet and bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:36-50). It is in Luke we find the story of Jesus staying at the home of Zacchaeus, the vertically challenged tax collector (Lk 19:1-10). It is in this Gospel that we read about the remorseful thief who was crucified with Jesus (Lk 23:43). Luke alone has the iconic story of the prodigal son and the loving father (Lk 15:11-32).

Luke shows Jesus speaking approvingly of Gentiles which was in contrast to the orthodox religious views of his day. Gentiles were thought to be fit only for the fires of hell. Jesus refers to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (both of whom were Gentiles) as shining examples (Lk 4:25-27). It is in Luke we read of that great statement from Jesus:

People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God (Lk 13:29 NIV).

When Luke gives us the genealogy of Jesus, he traces it not to Abraham, like Matthew does, but to Adam, underscoring the conviction that Jesus' mission is to the whole human race (compare Mt 1:2 and Lk 3:38).

It is because of Luke that we know Jesus had a particular concern for the poor. Indeed, it is Luke who points out to us that Jesus' own parents, Mary and Joseph, struggled with poverty at least in the early days of their marriage. This is indicated by the offering that they brought to the Temple:

“And they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Lk 2:24 NRSV).

According to the Torah (Lev 12:8) this was the offering of those who were financially impoverished. Mary and Joseph were poor.

Later, when friends of John the Baptist came to inquire of Jesus about his mission, Jesus concludes his response to them by saying:

The poor have good news brought to them (Lk 7:22 NRSV).

In Luke's account of the Beatitudes Jesus does not say, “Blessed are you who are poor in

spirit” as Matthew does but simply, “Blessed are you who are poor (Lk 6:20).

William Barclay comments that:

“Luke's gospel has been called ‘the gospel of the underdog.’ His heart runs out to everyone for whom life is an unequal struggle.”

Another group that was outcast or excluded were the Samaritans. In Jesus' day, Jews did not travel through Samaria, even if it was the shortest path between Galilee in the north and Jerusalem in the south. Instead, they took the longer and more dangerous trek around Samaria. They did this because of intense racial and religious prejudice. Jews despised Samaritans.

But Jesus traveled through Samaria. He freely spoke to Samaritans. Jesus healed ten lepers but the only one who was grateful was a Samaritan (Lk 17:11-19). After the resurrection Jesus would tell his followers:

“And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8 NRSV).

One of Jesus' best known parables is the parable of the Good Samaritan, found only in Luke (Lk 10:25ff). A lawyer was grilling Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" But the lawyer found himself cross-examined in return, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Jesus often answered a question with a question, especially if the real issue was the motive of the person who asked the question.

The lawyer got the answer right: love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself. But in the next section, he tries to find a loophole to justify his past omissions of love to others: "And who is my neighbor?"

But Jesus does not make a direct answer. Instead, he tells a story, the story we now refer to as the Story of the Good Samaritan. Through this story we learn that the question, "Who is my neighbor?" is the wrong question. The right question is: "How can I *be* a neighbor to others even if they would not want to be a neighbor to me?"

At the end of the story, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The answer is so obvious that the lawyer cannot help but know it yet he is unwilling to say the word "Samaritan" but says instead, "The one who had mercy on him." Then Jesus tells him, "Go and do likewise." The lesson here is that love is not to be conditioned by its object.

The Gospel is not just an ancient message we hang on to for the sake of nostalgia. The Gospel is more than a message. It is the vessel of Divine love. It is the promise of an indestructible hope. It is the power of God to change lives. You and I have the privilege to bring this power to bear on a troubled and hurting world. We can be Christ-like Samaritans because, in the end, Good Samaritans know that "neighbor" is not a problem to be solved but rather a person to be loved.

Why do you suppose Luke had such compassion for the marginalized of society? He was a Gentile, the only Gentile writer of any of the books of the New Testament – that could have been a factor. He may have come from Macedonia which at the time had a more emancipated view of women and men than the rest of the Mediterranean world – that may have influenced his views, especially his high regard for women. He was also a physician, and that is suggestive in and of itself. But here is the thing, in those days in the Roman Empire, most physicians were former slaves. If Luke was a former slave then he had personal experience in the most marginalized and powerless segment of society.

Sometimes when people come out of an adverse or oppressive situation they become bitter and angry. But there is no indication of that with Luke. In fact, he treats Roman figures with respect and he alone tells us of the Roman centurion who is praised for the strength of his faith (Lk7:9). Luke was not bitter over past treatment but rejoiced in the power of the Gospel to change lives – even the lives of former enemies.

This reminds me of another figure from history – Patrick of Ireland. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. Born in Britain of a Romanized family, he was captured at age sixteen by Irish raiders and carried into slavery in Ireland. He spent six years as a herdsman before escaping from his master and being reunited with his family in Britain. Called by God in a dream to bring Christianity to the Irish, he returned to Ireland and journeyed far and wide, baptizing chiefs and kings and converting whole clans.

One popular legend says that he explained the notion of the Holy Trinity using the shamrock, now the national flower of Ireland. It is also said that his preaching drove all the snakes from Ireland. Of course, no snakes were ever native to Ireland, and many scholars think this is a metaphor for the spreading of the Gospel to the Irish.

When Patrick was kidnaped, his father was murdered and his sister went missing. He was taken into Ireland and forced into slavery. Six hard years later he escaped. No one would have blamed him if he hated the Irish or never stepped foot in Ireland again.

But the love of God is greater than human hate. Patrick returned to Ireland to bring hope to those who had tried to steal his. His work brought a great deal of temporal good. He

almost single-handedly ended slavery and the slave trade in Ireland 1,400 years before Britain became so enlightened. More significantly, Patrick's work brought a great deal of spiritual good. God through Patrick led almost an entire nation to faith in Jesus Christ. I think Patrick would have had a strong sense of kinship with Luke and his belief that there are no limits to the love of God.

In our Scripture text for today from Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees are critical of Jesus for spending time with outcasts. Indeed, the Pharisees are often critical of Jesus. Perhaps this leads you to have a fairly low opinion of the Pharisees. After all, how can one regard their hypocrisy and self-righteousness with anything but disdain?

And yet there is something about them that is altogether *too* familiar. There is something in their attitude that strikes close to home. Perhaps it is because there is a Pharisee in each one of us. And if we think and act like Pharisees then let us not be surprised if we get our faith into trouble. We are going to find ourselves in conflict with Jesus whenever our pride makes us look down on others, whenever we trust in our own goodness and think God owes us a big favor, whenever we are more interested in venting our bitterness than we are in making friends.

But here is Good News! The conflict ends and peace arrives when we accept that Jesus came to rescue sinners like us, remember that salvation is a gift from God to be received in joy and faith, and ask Jesus to heal the hardness of our hearts so we can demonstrate his love to one and all.