

Recall that in our text last week Jesus was being so inundated with requests for him to heal and save that he left the city of Capernaum and went out into the deserted places - where people still went out to see him.

With no peace in the desert, he made his way back to the city. Word quickly got around that he was back, and wherever he was staying became quickly crowded - everyone wanting to hear what he had to say. For that's what Mark says was the draw: "Jesus was speaking the word to them."

Since we're only in the second chapter of Mark, I decided to look back to the beginning to discern what was this "word" Jesus was speaking? Some possibilities:

- John appeared in the wilderness "calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins." Perhaps Jesus picked up John's message.
- Jesus may have been telling them about *his own* baptism how "While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. 11 And there was a voice from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.'"
 - This is a pretty important Word Jesus heard, I want us to hold onto it as we move through the sermon.
- He could have been telling them about what happened after his baptism, the revelations he experienced when he was in the wilderness for 40

days. How he came to understand all that the Evil One will do to try to make us forsake God...thus divorcing ourselves from God's desires for us...thus losing our way. Maybe he told the people that each time Satan came at him with a temptation, Jesus turned it on its head and spoke first and foremost of God - and each time Jesus put God first, the Temptor went away.

- He could have been reminding them that all they have seen him do and heard his say is evidence that the kingdom of God is here and now...not some place far off.
- The people could have been just biding their time listening to him while they waited for the real action to start...the dueling with demons and the healing of people with infirmities.

Well, as Mark tells it, they didn't have to wait for long. For, as Jesus is speaking, four guys so desperately want Jesus to tend to their paralyzed buddy that they work their way up to the roof level and pry open a portion of the roof to gain access to Jesus.

Sure enough, Jesus noticed them, and was so amused/impressed at their faith that he healed the man. Right? First thing Jesus did was heal the man so he could walk right out of there?!? Nope - I'm just seeing if y'all are paying attention.

What's the first thing Jesus did? He forgave the paralytic man of his sins. Indeed, he kept the word John foretold, that Jesus came to help people turn their hearts and lives around and to face God. It's AWESOME! Jesus knew his mission, and he didn't discriminate between people of any type of ability. If there was forgiveness and reconciliation to occur, it mattered not who you were--what types of abilities or limitations one had--what Jesus knew is that **everyone** had work to do to reconcile themselves with God.

We need to be careful how we prejudge ANYONE (that's coming in the next story). But first I want to tell you of a present-day revelation I observed this week. Maybe some of you heard of the hot water our Cavaliers coach, Jim Beilein, got into this week when he told the team they were playing like "thugs?" He later emotionally recanted saying that he had intended to call them "slugs." However, his initial comment caused a maelstrom of reaction over the perceived racist terminology he used on his mostly African-American team. One of my vices is listening to sports talk-radio. This week, I heard one caller, who identified as African-American, make a powerful point. We can debate whether or not the coach should have used the term "thugs" on his team. "But what hurts me," the caller said, "is the automatic assumption that the word 'thug' is speaking about African-Americans. Are there not people of other races who are considered 'thugs?' What of the old school gangsters...and bullies of any race...aren't they also called 'thugs?' The whole argument shouldn't be tied to race in the first place," the caller concluded. "It's not right

that when the word “thug” was used people automatically thought ‘black man.’”

You never know from where wisdom is going to come, but I found it on sports talk-radio - haha!

But it ties in beautifully with our text today. I imagine that the friends of the paralytic were, like, stupefied, when Jesus forgave the man his sins rather than healing him of his paralysis. “That’s not why we went to all this effort to get him to you,” they may have said. But for Jesus, this was the most important thing...for anyone. Clearing the pathway to God of anything that creates an obstacle.

Then there’s the reaction of the religious leaders. They don’t seem to have as hard of a time with Jesus’ capacity to heal bodies and cast our demons as they did when he pronounced them man forgiven of his sins. They murmured to one another of his blasphemy for granting something only God was capable of doing. Again, it is presumed that a Nazorean peasant would not have the ability to perform these types of acts that even they, the learned religious leaders, were incapable of accomplishing.

That was only Act I. In the next story, Jesus raises their blood pressure even more. Jesus decided to take a stroll down by the lake - and the crowds

followed him again. So, Mark tells us, Jesus began to teach some more. This time, it doesn't seem to be about using words, per se. Jesus teaches by action.

He notices a fellow named Levi sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. We're told that Levi is the "son of Alphaeus." *Alphaeus* comes from the Hebrew root meaning "to exchange" or "change." Quite an appropriate name for someone dealing in money - exchanging Jewish coin for Roman or Greek, and vice versa. Also, an interesting name for what Levi "the son of Exchange/Change" is about to do after meeting Jesus!

Remember Jesus is teaching! Jesus walks up to Levi in his booth and says, "Follow me." Like most of the other people Jesus invoked to follow him, Levi does. Thus exchanging his tax collecting ways for following Jesus' Way.

Jesus needs Levi's help to further Jesus' education of the people. So they have dinner at Levi's house - which includes Levi's people. Tax collectors! (This is when you boo and hiss!) Tax collectors were "reviled by the Jews of Jesus' day because of their perceived greed and collaboration with the Roman occupiers. Tax collectors amassed personal wealth by demanding tax payments in excess of what Rome levied and keeping the difference."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tax_collector) Thus engaging in "usury," a practice forbidden by Jewish law, tax collectors were considered sinners. Levi being one, we now know how he was able to afford having so many people over at his house!

Mark tells us Jesus was at table with tax collectors (*boo/hiss*) and sinners: (*stage whisper*) *in fact, the room seemed to be filled with them!* And not only that, many of “them” had begun to follow Jesus.

Noticing that Jesus was sitting at table with sinners, the religious leaders ask of his disciples (I guess these are the OFFICIAL disciples), they ask of them the million dollar question, “Why is he eating with sinners and tax collectors?” Or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, “What kind of example is this, acting cozy with the riffraff?”

I call this the “million dollar question” because it is, what I believe, is at the heart of the “Word” that Jesus had been sharing..it is the crux of what he was teaching. Why was he eating with “those” people? It’s **because** of what he heard when he came out of the waters at his baptism:

“You are my Child, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

“You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

“You are my Child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

My friends, let me remind you, the Christ *was* indeed fully God. But, Jesus was also fully human. Just as God meant those words to rest on Jesus, God means for those words to rest on all humanity. Jesus understood that completely. Unfortunately most of the people around him did not. Unfortunately most of the people around us do not.

When the religious leaders asked why Jesus sat at table with those they deemed “less than,” they heard and saw that **the love of God is** the full weight behind Jesus’ response: **Because.**

Jesus loved each and every one of them, because they were all thugs. Each and every one of them being worthy of God’s love. Each and every one of them...the religious leaders included...all in need of letting go of the the things that were barriers between them and the fullness of God’s love for everyone. And, Mark tells us, most in the room understood that perfectly, and they were willing to let go of their old notions in order to drink in the sweetness of the kingdom of God being in their midst. All of them, not just Levi, being sons and daughters of Change.

As the text concludes for us,

22 “No one pours new wine into old leather wineskins; otherwise, the wine would burst the wineskins and the wine would be lost and the wineskins destroyed. But new wine is for new wineskins.”

As each of us encounters Jesus, we are invited to shift and change and reorder our lives to embrace the love of the One who claims us and calls us and sets us free to live abundantly. Jesus gives us permission to make this change - perhaps that’s why so many people kept following him. Perhaps that is why so many people--including you and I--still do!

Thanks be to God - Amen.