Too Much of a Good Thing? (5/5)

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(5 out of 5)

Catherine:

Luke 5:27-39

> After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." and he got up, left everything, and followed him.
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> Then 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. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "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.
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> Then they said to him "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink. Jesus said to the, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"

Most of us, when we hear the passage that I just read, find quite familiar the calling of Levi and the parables of the new patch on the old cloth and the wineskins. But what we often overlook is what Levi does immediately after he himself becomes a disciple: "Then Levi gave a great banquet for Jesus in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them." The passage goes on to speak of the attack the Pharisees make upon Jesus for the company he keeps.

Justo:

We can well imagine that the Pharisees would have no objection to the conversion of Levi. After all, here was a publican changing his way of life. But now it appears that the door through which Levi has entered is becoming too wide. Jesus has opened his fellowship, not only to Levi himself, but also to a multitude of other publicans and sinners. And this makes the Pharisees cringe.

Catherine:

Many of us in the majority culture would be very glad to have members of other ethnic groups become part of our congregations. In fact, we are committed to it. The fear is the banquets—the large crowds of these others that might come along--and completely change the character of the congregation. The new patch won't match; the old wineskins will break; and indeed, we will say: “The old is good.” What would it be like to be strangers in our own congregation?

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Justo:

Which may be precisely the reason why so-called “mainline” churches have so much difficulty with mission among Hispanics and other minorities. Our own United Methodist Church has an outstanding record in mission in Korea, in Zaire, and in the Philippines. But our record is not so good among minorities in our own backyard.

The reason usually given in the case of Hispanics is that, after all, Hispanics are already Roman Catholics. But that is not the real reason. The real reason is not that we want to avoid any

semblance of sheep-stealing. The real reason is not that most Hispanics are Roman Catholic. The real reason is that the so-called "mainline" denominations are, in fact, "old-line," that we do not want to change, that we are afraid of change, and that a certain intuition tells us that, were we to undertake significant mission among Hispanics, and to be successful at it, our own mainline or rather old-line denominations would have to change.

That is why our old-line denominations are so successful in mission, as long as there is saltwater in between. But when mission involves bringing different people into our fold, right here at home, things are different. Saltwater acts as a buffer so that the center can be insulated from whatever is happening at the periphery, and not be really challenged by it.

Catherine:

If we were to retell from memory the parables that are found here, we would probably tell them in the Matthew or Mark versions. In both of those, the difficulty with the new cloth is that it is unshrunk—"Sanforized" was not a household word then—and therefore, when put on old, washed cloth, would tear away when it was first washed. In the case of the wine, neither Matthew nor Mark adds the strange conclusion that Luke adds: "No one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'" For Luke, the problem of the patch is that the old is faded, therefore the new patch stands out like a sore thumb. Besides, in order to get the new patch, a perfectly good new garment had a hole cut in it. In either case, it is clear that old and new are rarely comfortable with each other. Congregations can assimilate some new people

fairly readily, especially if there are no great cultural differences. They can add a small number of members from distinctly different groups, as long as they adapt to the congregational culture. But large numbers of those who bring clear cultural differences, and who will alter perhaps drastically the social character of the congregation, that is a very different matter, and few congregations are ready or willing to do that.

When the parable says that new wine is for new wineskins, does that mean simply that new ethnic groups should have their own congregations? Or does it also mean that all of us have to become new—renewed—in order for the cultural mix to be fruitful?

Justo:

Most probably the latter. That is probably the cause of our slowness in mission. We are so enamored of our old wineskins, that we are afraid they might burst if we allow new wine to come in.

And in this we are right, for as we shall be discussing and discovering during these days together, mission to new groups requires, not only great dedication and goodwill, which we certainly have, but also willingness to change much of what we have long taken for granted. Willingness to change our way of being church. Willingness to subject our structures to the demands of mission. Willingness, if necessary, to create new wineskins adequate for the new wine.

Catherine:

There is a third interesting facet to this passage. When the Pharisees complain about the company Jesus keeps, his reply is: “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.” If we were among those Pharisees, what would we understand by such words? Is Jesus saying that we are really quite righteous and therefore in no need of his ministry? Or would we understand it to be more ironic—that if we wish to consider ourselves righteous then we have put ourselves outside of his mission? Perhaps our reaction to the words themselves would be a test and a judgment upon us.

On what basis do we carry on a mission to those whom our society considers insignificant? Are we the righteous? Are we the healthy? Or are we those who stand equally in need of the ministry of Jesus? To go back to the banquet at the beginning of this passage: Who are we in this tableau? Are we tax collectors already called to discipleship—like Levi—who then invites others to meet Jesus? Or are we the Pharisees who might approve of one tax collector following Jesus, but who wince at a whole group? Is our major category for defining ourselves sinner, or righteous, or majority, or minority culture?

Justo:

In a way, the irony of Jesus’s reply to the Pharisees is still the irony which we, as Christian, encounter at every turn. Those who are healthy have no need of a physician. Therefore, either

we confess ourselves to be ill, or we have no need and no place for the divine Physician. There is no other way to proclaim God's "amazing grace," than to begin by declaring that it "saved a wretch like me." There is no other way to be in mission, than to confess that we, too, are the sinners and publicans who are invited to the banquet only by the grace of God. We are not a church of healthy people trying to reach the sick around us. According to this passage, to claim that we are a church made up of healthy people would mean that Jesus is not for us! We are a church of sick people, trying to share with the sick world around us the word of healing. And that is ultimately what makes mission so urgent, not only for the world around us, but also for ourselves. For, unless we are on a mission to those outsiders who do not look as decent or as good as us, we risk forgetting that we too are sinners in need of God's grace.

Throughout Scripture, God is announcing a great banquet. To this banquet, says God, people will be invited from East and West, from North and South. To this banquet, says Jesus, not only Levi, but publicans and sinners are also invited. We may not like it. But we have no choice. This is the sort of banquet God likes and promises. We may join the banquet, or we may stand outside, looking in and protesting that God should be otherwise, and give special treatment to us nice folk. The problem is that, if we join the banquet, we shall have to sit at table with some folk we don't like, And, if we refuse to sit with such folk, we refuse to sit also with the Lord of the banquet! The table is set; the invitation is open; the day is now.