

## The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

Hosea 2:14-20  
2 Corinthians 3:1-6  
Mark 2:13-22

“What makes the wind blow?” I used to ask my children when they were small. At first they were stumped, and waited for me to give them the answer. When they had waited long enough to build up the proper suspense, I would tell them that the wind is caused by the leaves moving on trees. My wife Jane would look down, grimace, and shake her head. It didn’t take long for our daughters to realize that I had not given them the right answer. In more recent years, I have been privileged to use the same joke with my grandchildren, and now their mothers join Jane in looking down and shaking their heads.

What makes this a joke is that it is backwards. It isn’t the leaves moving on the trees that make the wind blow. It’s the wind blowing that makes the leaves move. The joke is that cause and effect are reversed, and once you see it, you can laugh—or, if you prefer, look down and shake your head.

Today’s Gospel is about getting things backward. The trouble is that in this case it isn’t a joke, but quite serious. When Jesus takes what both traditional religion and secular wisdom hold to be true and points out that just the opposite is true, his adversaries start to become his enemies.

The story begins with Jesus calling Levi to follow him. That is not necessarily a call to become a disciple. It could be simply an invitation to join the crowd that is already walking with him through the streets of Capernaum and listening to him teach. Later on, as they were sitting at dinner, Jesus’ disciples were asked by the earnestly religious scribes and Pharisees why Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners.

There are two things to notice here. First of all, it is possible that the people asking the question were not trying to condemn Jesus as much as they were inquiring why a man of his apparent religious stature would break the law that said you should not share a common meal with sinners, that is, with outsiders to the faith or with insiders who are not keeping the faith. Eating together is a powerful symbol, and the general rule was that the people you eat with reflect greatly on your own character.

The second thing to notice is that the question was asked of Jesus’ disciples, not of him directly. That’s what is called today in systems theory “triangulation.” The best way to deal with triangulation is to short-circuit it without delay. In this case, that’s exactly what Jesus did. He overheard the question and spoke directly to the people who asked it. That immediately collapsed the triangle.

Jesus said, “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.”

Apparently some of the questioners got clear on the systems theory, because the next time he was asked a question it was addressed directly to Jesus himself. The trouble was that nobody was yet quite clear on the meaning of his earlier reply. The question this time was asked from a different point of view: “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” This prompted Jesus to reply, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?” Then he went on to point out that no one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, because the new patch will pull away from the old cloth and cause a worse tear. He said that no one puts new wine into old wineskins, because the new wine will burst the old skins and everything will be lost.

Now what’s the point of all this? The point is that while conventional wisdom says you don’t eat at table with people who appear not to be as good and worthy as you are, Jesus said you do. Conventional wisdom both outside and sometimes inside the church says that first you become righteous and then you may share the meal with Jesus. He was saying that the meal itself is a means for becoming righteous through fellowship with him. In other words, conventional wisdom says you can’t eat with Jesus unless you are righteous. Jesus said that you may never become righteous unless you do.

Notice the sequence in the story. First, Jesus called Levi and others to learn from him. Then he ate and drank with them. In a sense, what we have here is none other than the classic Sunday liturgy of the historic church. First there is the Office of the Word in which we hear the Gospel proclaimed, and then there is the Office of the Sacrament of Holy Communion in which we share the table of the Lord. As long

as the church is clear that all who accept the invitation to learn from the Lord Jesus Christ are also welcome at table with him, the church is faithful. But when the church erects additional prerequisites for communion with him, it has it backward, and it is unfaithful.

For example, there are several Christian denominations today which take the position that only members of that particular denomination are permitted to receive communion in their churches. Often I have heard Roman Catholic priests and others declare that until we agree on doctrine, we cannot commune together. That's backwards. I believe that unless we commune together, we may *never* arrive at consensus on doctrine at all! Instead of thinking ourselves into a new way of acting, perhaps we need to act our way into a new way of thinking.

Martin Luther was quite clear on who is welcome at the communion table. He said that you are worthy to receive communion when you know yourself to be unworthy, except for the grace of God. Communion is not a victory celebration of our goodness, but a humble meal in which our Lord Jesus Christ reassures us that our sins are forgiven and strengthens us in the faith. Many years ago I met an elderly woman from Scandinavia who said that she had never communed even though she was baptized and confirmed as a child. She said she didn't feel right about receiving communion until she was good enough to receive it. I told her she had it backwards. Communion is for sinners, I said. Waiting to commune until you are free from sin is like waiting to eat until you're full.

Of course, all of this assumes that communion occurs every week in every church. The trouble is that it doesn't, at least not in churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Approximately eighty percent of our churches do not have weekly communion, or, if it is held weekly, it's switched back and forth between the early and the late services on Sunday. Despite the centuries-long practice of having communion as the chief service of worship every Sunday and despite the fact that the Lutheran Confessions of faith assume weekly communion, four out of five churches in our denomination either play around with scheduling it, or else they skip it completely on some Sundays. By so doing, they excommunicate their entire congregation on those Sundays when communion is not available. Every now and then I hear of congregations voting on how often to have communion. No Lutheran church ever has the right to vote on that any more than it has the right to vote on whether Jesus was raised from the dead. If you're a Lutheran church, then by definition you have communion as your chief service every Sunday.

Conventional wisdom among the religious as well as among the non-religious would tell us that first we must be righteous, and then we are entitled to come into the presence of God. That's what the religious people in today's Gospel thought, and that's what many people still think today. But in Jesus Christ that is declared backwards. Instead, we accept his invitation to come into his presence just as the sinners we are, and then we let his presence transform us into *forgiven* sinners.

But if that is true for us, it is true for others as well. It is not for us to accept the Gospel's wisdom for ourselves but conventional wisdom for others. All sinners are welcome without exception, not because we think they ought to be, but because that is exactly what God has declared in his Son Jesus Christ.

Now that is not always easy. The old cloth that says only the righteous are welcome will be ripped to shreds when the new cloth of the Gospel is sewn on to it. The old wineskins that say church is only for good people will be burst like balloons when the heady new wine of forgiveness is poured into them. For the self-righteous who want to cling to conventional wisdom, that is bad news. But for those who know themselves to be the undeserving sinners they are, that is news that is good beyond measure.

Leaves moving on trees don't make the wind blow. The wind moves the leaves. So also human righteousness doesn't entitle us to learn from our Lord and feast with him. Rather, his presence among us in word and sacrament moves us, like leaves on a tree, to respond with gratitude and growth when he comes into our presence and invites us to come eternally into his.

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