

**Mark 2:13-17**  
February 28, 2021

Hope Mennonite Church  
Lent 2, Year B

### Coloring Outside the Lines

Levi is a **tax collector**. And in Jesus' day, the general public did **not** regard tax collectors as BFF's. That's an understatement. Tax collectors were considered **traitors**, **sell-outs**. They collaborated with the Roman occupation army. They made a **profit** off their own people's **oppression**. **Imagine!** And the Romans gave tax collectors **latitude** to charge extra and keep that money for themselves ... **and** gave them soldiers to back up this extortion scheme **with their swords**. The Romans and their tax collectors especially liked taxing small businesses **like fishing operations** along the Sea of Galilee. Tax collectors were **hated**. And **that** is **no surprise at all!**

However ... **Jesus calls** a tax collector named Levi. And Jesus says to him exactly what he said to the four fishermen: **Follow me!** Jesus **calls** a tax collector ... a **despised traitor** ... to be a **disciple**. And as soon as he does, Levi gets up from his tax booth and follows him.

Immediately, it seems like the roles **reverse**. Jesus had said, "Follow me." Now **Levi** apparently says to **Jesus**, "Follow me ... to my house ... for dinner." And Jesus does ... and brings his disciples. In addition, the text says **many others** joined them—that is, **many** tax collectors and **sinners**. Now for the longest while I thought these other people were **Levi's** friends ... you know, his tax-collector friends. But the text is clear: They're **Jesus'** friends. These many tax collectors and **sinners** had been following **Jesus** around! They had become a regular part of his traveling band. **Now** this **diverse** collection of "**fringe**" people is sitting around Levi's table and breaking bread together. What a scene! Is this the Island of Misfit Toys or what? And who's right there in the midst? **Jesus!**

What Jesus is doing is **shocking** ... and ... **powerful**. To fully appreciate **that**, we have to understand the meaning of **sinner**. Back then, **sinner** did apply to someone who broke a commandment, fell out of favor with God, and needed forgiveness. **But** ... **sinner** also had **another** meaning. "**Sinners**" were whole **classes** of people: People with certain occupations or economic status or family arrangements or ethnic backgrounds or disabilities. These kinds of "**sinners**" **couldn't** undo their "**sin**" by being sorry

and receiving forgiveness and making restitution and promising to do better. **These “sinners”** were understood to be **permanently** out of favor with God and God’s people ... and there was **nothing** they can do to change that.

So, when Jesus **welcomes “sinners” and eats with them**, he’s not just being **kind**. He’s not just **celebrating diversity**. He’s doing something **revolutionary**. He’s **challenging** the whole value system and structure of society. He’s **challenging** the class divisions, the purity code, who’s **in** and who’s **out**, and especially who’s **in** and who’s **out with God**. When Jesus **welcomes “sinners,”** he’s not just giving people who **messed up** another chance. He’s undermining the status quo ... disturbing the peace ... coloring the world in a whole new way. And he’s coloring it **outside the lines**. Jesus **welcomes “sinners.”** And **that scrambles** all the old categories and the systems that keep them in place. **That destabilizes** the powers that be. But most important of all, by **welcoming “sinners,”** Jesus gives **hope** to people who have no other hope. Jesus gives **hope** to **people outside the lines**.

And it’s significant that Jesus does this **at a dinner**. That may seem to us like a rather inconsequential occasion ... **But** ... meals were loaded with social **rules** and social **expectations** and social **lines**. And Jesus **crosses** them ... **knowingly** ... **willfully**. At **this** dinner, the guests are tax collectors and **sinners**. And who’s right there in the midst? **Jesus!**

Oh, it gets better! How do you suppose these diverse guests got along **with each other?** You’ve got Jesus’ disciples—**fishermen**—**alongside** tax collectors who **extort money** from fishermen ... And **now they’re** saying to each other, “Please pass the raspberry vinaigrette.” Who does that? Who puts opposites, **antagonists**, at the same table? **Jesus!** Jesus even colors outside the lines **with his own followers!**

Jesus **welcomes “sinners”** ... **unfavored** people ... **marginal** people ... **disempowered** people. **His** guest list includes everybody who’s nobody ... the people your mother warned you about ... the people to whom you give free bus tickets, so they’ll leave downtown Atlanta when the Olympics come to town, so the TV stations from other countries won’t see America’s homeless. Seated at Levi’s table are ... the unacceptables, the undesireables, the untouchables, the expendables, the losers, the collateral damage,

the rabble, the dregs, the blight, the bad apples, the trash. And who's right there in the midst? **Jesus!** He's got friends in low places. He's got a bus ticket. He **talks** to the trash. He **shares** with the "sell-out." He **eats** with the traitor.

And it's **not** just this **one** event. Mark is showing us what becomes the **pattern** of Jesus' ministry. What happens at Levi's house **doesn't stay** at Levi's house. It's **not** the exception. This becomes **the rule**. Jesus takes the **revolution on the road!** ***The socially and religiously discarded people are very interested in Jesus and he is very interested in them. Coloring outside the lines*** becomes Jesus' **standard** operating procedure.

As his ministry continues, Jesus will ***cross the lines*** to commend foreigners, talk with women in public, touch people with infectious diseases, forgive sex workers, and hold little children in his arms. ***Why can't he just stay within the lines?*** Wherever he goes, Jesus will **mess up everything** that's neat and determined and predictable!

Mark tells us: Levi's house is only the beginning. Jesus will show up in other towns and step on every crack in the sidewalk. And in response, the **gatekeepers** of acceptability ... react like threatened cats ... arching their backs ... fur standing on end ... snarling ... showing their claws. **But** ... to the **unacceptable** people, Jesus is like breath itself.

When Jesus ***welcomes "sinners,"*** he's not just being **kind**. He's **challenging** the whole structure of society. If Jesus had lunch at Dockum Drugstore in 1958, where do you think he would have sat?

What Jesus **himself says** about his actions is just as striking as the actions themselves. He says that his hanging out with **unacceptable people** is like a doctor relating to sick people. That is, Jesus labels his **revolutionary** behavior as the most **natural** thing in the world ... as **natural** as why doctors become doctors. Of course doctors relate to unwell people! What else would they do? That's their whole purpose in life. Jesus says, "Yeah, that's me."

Jesus really does ***color the world*** in a whole new way. And something **strange** has happened with that ... **because**, in the course of history, the **revolutionary** Jesus **became part of the establishment**. The undomesticated, non-institutional Jesus **became** institutionalized. The church **organized** faith in its

Lord. That brought a lot of good. And yet, here's the thing: The followers of the **line-crosser** became **line-makers**. And that's what we call **irony**. Maybe it was reasonable. Maybe it was necessary. Maybe it was inevitable. **And** ... maybe it has also been a **compromise**. And, we have to wonder, what would **Jesus** **the line-crosser** say about what Christianity has made of him?

Dear friends, who are the "**sinner**" of **our** society? Who are the people that our systems **dis-privilege** so that others can be **privileged**? What are the **structures** that maintain injustice ... and how do we change them? The news last week had a map of the world and projections about where the vaccine will go and when it will get there. Friends, there really are privileged and dis-privileged people and systems that keep it that way. Recently, my grandson said, "Opa, you're a girl." I said, "Actually, I'm not, but thanks for saying something nice about me." He's a good boy. And yet, how early the sense of favored and less-favored creeps into our social awareness.

Who are the **unacceptable** people around **us**, and what does it feel like to **internalize** that you don't make the grade? Whom would Jesus invite to share a meal with him? And how do **we** pick up the crayon and **color outside the lines** ... become **advocates** and **allies** in **Jesus' expanding welcome**?

### ***Scripture Reading Mark 2:13-17***

<sup>13</sup>*Jesus went out again along the sea. The whole crowd was gathering to him. And he taught them.*

<sup>14</sup>*Then, as he was passing along, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus. He was sitting at the tax collection booth. Jesus said to him, "Follow me!" So, Levi got up and followed him.* <sup>15</sup>*Now it happened that Jesus was reclining at dinner in Levi's house. And many tax collectors and sinners were having dinner with Jesus and his disciples, for they were many and they kept following him.*

<sup>16</sup>*When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"* <sup>17</sup>*Jesus heard it and said to them, "Those who are well don't need a doctor. Rather, those who are sick do. I have not come to call righteous people but sinners."*