

Jesus heals and teaches –

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, we heard Jesus say, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news. As we move through Mark's gospel, we'll look for signs of the kingdom of God...the good news. We'll work to see those signs by asking some questions.

How is this story good news?

For whom is it good news, then and now?

For whom is in not good news, then and now?

What would it mean for it to become good news for everyone?

How are we invited to be a part of the good news?

First, let's talk briefly about these three stories individually and then see if we can tease out a common thread...something we can say is the good news of today's reading.

The first story is of course a healing story. Here at the beginning of only the second chapter this is already the fourth healing story. At this point, Jesus has already cast out a demon, healed a leper, and healed Simon's mother-in-law.

But this story does something the other healing stories in the gospel don't. It links the healing with forgiveness. We probably all find this puzzling. The passage does not indicate any specific sin of the paralyzed man or really even make a statement about sin as the cause of his paralysis. Nowhere in the gospels does it explicitly say that sin causes sickness.

But since this is the only healing story that links forgiveness to healing, the difference must tell us something about what this story is really about.

It tells us that while yes, healing is a part of God's kingdom, this passage is primarily about two other things - God's forgiveness, and Jesus' claim to authority as God's Messiah. He has authority to forgive because he is God.

Forgiveness and healing a paralyzing condition both free the man. He is no longer bound by either his sin, or his wounded nervous system.

And importantly, healing and forgiveness both restore relationships. A paralyzed man would not have been treated as a full member of the community. One could argue we still struggle with that even now with people with disabilities.

That then leads into the second story about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Sinners were people who, in the eyes of the religious leaders, had a blatant disregard for God's law. And good Jews shouldn't hang out with them.

It turns out that his too is primarily a story of healing and forgiveness. As those outcasts gathered around the table, they knew that Jesus saw them through different eyes than the scribes and pharisees. He saw them through the eyes of love. And that simple act of sharing a meal drew them into God's kingdom...a realm the scribes would have said they were excluded from.

And then comes the question about fasting. Again, this is Jesus making a statement about who he is. And who he is and the kingdom he brings are very different from what the scribes and pharisees...and pretty much everybody...thought. It is the new wine, meant to be savored and enjoyed.

OK. So the common thread in the three is Jesus' claim that he has the authority of God to forgive, heal, and restore. The kingdom of God is a way of being in which people and communities are healed and restored. And that is indeed new wine, because the Pharisees and scribes were more likely to use God's law to exclude.

OK. So we should say a little about scribes and Pharisees. There were actually multiple different Jewish sects, or movements in Jesus' day.

There were the Zealots, a revolutionary bunch who plotted the violent overthrow of Rome. There were the Essenes who were a sort of quasi-monastic group.

There were the more traditional Temple Jews with its priests and sacrificial system. They were linked to the Sadducees.

And then there were the Pharisees and their scribes. They were basically a reform movement. They were very committed to the law of Moses. They were determined to keep Israel as a holy people set apart in the midst of the Roman occupation. When Jesus says the righteous have no need of healing, that's who he's talking about. The scribes and Pharisees were very righteous.

And then there was Jesus and his movement who repeatedly clashed with the Temple authorities and the Pharisees and their scribes.

So for whom in the story is this good news? Obviously for the paralyzed man. He is healed and set free to live life and be a full member of the community. For Levi and all the other sinners shunned by the righteous Jews it is good news as they begin to grasp that this kingdom of God...this world Jesus ushers in...is for them too.

For whom is it not so good news? Well in these stories, it's the scribes. It's the very righteous ones. They are appalled by the claims Jesus makes...blasphemy they say. They can't imagine why Jesus, who seems to claim authority from God, would ever in a million years hang out with Levi and his ilk. As near as they can tell, Jesus is about the business of ruining the relationship between Jews and God.

This new way Jesus demonstrates is the new wine that is exploding the rigid boundaries of their old wineskins. And they are shocked and dismayed.

How could it ever become good news for them? Repentance. They need to have their minds changed...to see things differently. And when they do that, they will see how much more beautiful their community is for the inclusion of the people they'd rather exclude. We know at least one Pharisee, Nicodemus, made that turn, at least in part. And it's the power and draw of Jesus that triggers that repentance.

So what about today? For whom now are these stories good news?

Honestly, although the labels they're given have changed, it's basically the same people. It's hopeful for all of us to know that healing is a cornerstone in God's kingdom. Even when we don't seem to get the miracle, we can still trust that God is working towards our healing and the healing of those we love.

But this goes beyond just physical healing. This is good news for all the people who get pushed to the margins...the disabled, the poor, the ex-convicts, the gay and trans people, the elderly, black and brown people. You would think if Christians did in fact believe the good news that the kingdom of God has come and is coming, we would be falling all over ourselves to bring the outcasts into full community.

But the Pharisees are alive and well. Their labels too have changed...and all too often their label is Christian. But they too are the very righteous ones – in fact often very self-righteous. They may say that the church is a place for sinners, but they may mean only their particular brand of sin. Those other sinners really need to change before they can be allowed in. You will notice that Jesus did not demand change from the people in this story. Not even the Pharisees.

So how do these stories become good news for the Pharisees of our time? For everyone? The answer is the same. Repentance. Seeing the world and the cast offs with new eyes. Letting our fears go and forging relationships with people we are afraid of or kind of look down on. Removing barriers that keep people from being a full part of our society. And learning how beautiful the community can be when everyone is a full part – when we all benefit from the talents and experiences of people who've been routinely rejected.

That is new wine...delicious crisp new wine. And as those at the forefront of inclusion movements are learning, many still try to contain it...to put limits on it with the stiff, brittle walls of an old wineskin.

But the Kingdom of God will not be contained that way. Instead, it will burst out of all the rigid containers we might want to stuff it into. It will burst out and surprise us with an expansive love and inclusion that leaves nobody out. May we all hear that as really good news.