

St. Matthew A.M.E. Church  
Bible Study  
Monday, November 24, 2008  
St. Mark 2:13-14, 22

Growth is imperative for Disciples of Christ. Growth presupposes change. In fact for a growing person, there is nothing as permanent as change. But change creates problems. New ways must be found as old ways fail, new habits formed as old ones are broken, new attitudes adopted as old ones die. There are many people who want to be somebody, but who resist growth because growth requires change, and change is risky.

The nature of change can be seen in the way Jesus challenged the religious establishment. Although Jesus generally reached out in a positive manner, at the same time he created tension between Himself and the spiritual leaders of Israel. Jesus used an interesting metaphor to describe His effect on the religious establishment of His day. He says, “no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins.” (Mark 2:22)

Old wineskins are dry and brittle; they don't adapt well to new wine. New wine causes the old bag to stretch, crack and leak. The Jewish religious establishment was the old wineskin, and the new wineskin represented the teachings of Jesus. They were alarmed that Jesus invited Levi, a corrupt tax collector, to follow Him. They were astonished that He touched and healed a social outcast and that He didn't practice the hyper-legalities of the Sabbath. They had a problem with change. Yet, the word sanctification implies that disciples should be changing, constantly becoming more like Christ. (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18) The new wine of Christ places incredible pressure on a person's emotional, cultural, and spiritual life. Nevertheless, we have to be ready and willing to modify our wineskins. Jesus kept pouring out new wine, creating an intense battle between Him and the religious establishment.

The first conflict with His Jewish enemies came with His calling of Levi, the tax collector. Tax collectors were despised men. They didn't take a salary; instead they received a commission based on their effectiveness in collecting taxes. The collectors Levi among them were commonly extortionist. They were so hated by Jewish leaders that they were grouped with outcast, murderers, and robbers. They were disqualified as judges and witnesses and were excommunicated from the synagogue. Their families considered them either dead or a disgrace. Jesus couldn't have chosen a more controversial figure for a spiritual encounter. One cannot help but think that Jesus selection of Levi was intentional. To add insult to injury, Jesus changed Levi's name to Matthew which means “gift of God.”

Jesus called Levi just like He did the other apostles and like the other apostles he responded immediately. He had heard of Jesus and knew there was something special about Him. Jesus offered Levi acceptance and hope to escape his plight of being an outcast and a disgrace. According to Luke 5:29, Levi gave a big reception in his home to

introduce his friends to Jesus. But who would come to an outcast party other than other outcast. It is likely that prostitutes, winos, wheeler dealers, gamblers, extortionist and other assorted riffraff came to see what Levi was up to now. Jesus was grateful for the opportunity to talk with these contacts from Levi's world. He was enjoying Himself at Levi's banquet. It provided Him the opportunity to talk with and minister to the hungry hearts of receptive sinners. The reception probably had a positive, warm, open atmosphere. Unfortunately this was soon to change because the Jewish religious leaders showed up. When they saw Him eating with sinners and tax collectors they asked His disciples, "why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (verse 16) To these religious leaders Jesus eating and drinking with the scum of society was an outrage.

But in response to their criticism Jesus accurately described their hypocrisy: "John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'he has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." (Matthew 11:18-19) Jesus further said, "it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17) Some believers rejoice that all their neighbors are Christians. It is not unusual to hear someone praise the Lord for giving them all Christians to work with. Jesus on the other hand, advised us to seek out places to live, work and play where we have a lot of contact with unbelievers. Disciples would be well advised to take a chapter from the life of Jesus who ministered with both feet in the world. We would be well taught by example and explanation how to reach the lost where they live, work and play- in the real world.

There was a wonderful couple who had a deep desire to reach their friends with the gospel. Their friends however were of the country club set-drinking, dancing, bridge, etc..... This harvest field was well heeled, but just as spiritually destitute as any other. When some of the officers in their church heard of their efforts they criticized them, told them they were out of line and said that God would not bless their efforts. The couple would not back off from seeking to penetrate this country club crowd and their friends. Offended the well meaning officers went to the pastor for counsel and advice. The pastor asked the officers how many people they had led to Christ lately? They lowered their heads in embarrassment. If we only seek to bring to Christ those we are comfortable with the harvest will remain plentiful and people will not be brought into the kingdom. We must follow the example of Jesus. It may seem and sound radical, but it is simply following the example of Jesus; He had both feet in the real world.