

## Talking Across Difference

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text: Mark 2:13-22

### SCRIPTURE READING Mark 2:13-22

13 Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. <sup>14</sup>As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

15 And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. <sup>16</sup>When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' <sup>17</sup>When Jesus heard this, he said to them, '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.'

18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' <sup>19</sup>Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. <sup>20</sup>The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

21 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. <sup>22</sup>And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

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This is a little bit of a new years' sermon, but to offer my thoughts for 2024 I need to go back a ways.

I remember the early days of the internet. Several of us gathered here remember those early days of monochrome print on black screens. We remember the buzz and whine of the modem connection. My first year in college I learned to communicate digitally through a campus VAX system - basically an electronic bulletin board - think Facebook with no images and focused just on one local college campus. It was wonderfully useful - you could advertise events, find study buddies, borrow books, get campus information. But it wasn't perfect.

It was on the VAX that I encountered a problematic character - I won't name him because even today the internet is a small world. This problematic character on our VAX was known for publicly ripping people to virtual shreds. Was there a typo in your post? He'd call out your academic inferiority. Did he disagree with your opinion? He'd call out your naivete. Had he woken up with a headache? Everyone on the VAX was fair game. Political differences resulted in particularly strident and difficult VAX exchanges. He was what we'd these days call a troll.

Now, we all knew the person behind the username. This was a small campus and your username was your name. Interestingly, this person was known to be polite, agreeable, and even reasonable in real life interactions. He was only vicious online. I can remember a conversation with a friend, after they'd been virtually humiliated. What was his deal? To us it seemed like he thought the rules of in person interactions were completely separate from VAX interactions. Manners were irrelevant online, and what happened online would have no impact in real life. Hiding behind a screen made him anonymous, he assumed. Of course, that wasn't true, and

eventually, no one wanted to talk to him in person any more. His destructiveness online was destructive to an actual human community.

What's past, as Shakespeare wrote, is prologue. Over the last thirty years, the internet has become both more useful and more dangerous to the human spirit. There are more resources available to us than ever before - and a large fraction of them are untrustworthy or even vicious. We think we go on social media for human interaction - but our minds don't actually process online time as authentic social interaction.<sup>1</sup> I don't have the footnote for this - but I've heard many times that the people who make money on cable news and social media do so by provoking negative emotions. The added problem is, negative emotions online tend to swirl and agitate and cross over into real life.

It's January 2024. In the US, it's already a very challenging time. Our quadrennial national election cycle already has people stressed and in conflict. (And if you just took a deep breath wondering if I'm about to go partisan - I'm not.) Our academic institutions and leaders are under scrutiny of a sort unseen in many decades. Our campuses, towns and community groups are divided in multiple ways. And our world is fractured by multiple terrible wars. All together, hatred - in rhetoric and in deed - is skyrocketing faster than CoVid case counts.

So, the new year is a good time to ask: how will we live and act and breathe this year? How will we say no to hatred and division? How shall we live this year? What are the protective factors we can put in place for ourselves and our community?

I don't think I have the answers. If offered a platform to speak to the nation in this time I don't know that I'd have some brilliant wisdom that would get the US through this year without hatred, without violence.

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<sup>1</sup> According to NPR's LifeKit

Instead, I turn local. Remembering those VAX days when we finally said no to the troll online and in real life, I ponder what we can do in this community in 2024. I turn to you and me in Pilgrim Church and in Lexington and Massachusetts and in our little pockets of New Hampshire and Ohio and Tennessee and Louisiana.

I give thanks every day that this community, in 2024, is not in conflict. This is worth naming and celebrating. We've seen conflict before. But we are not right now, and that's good news.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it this way: "Let [the Christian] thank God on [their] knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."<sup>2</sup>

So we do not take this for granted. It is worthwhile to exercise our muscles of healthy communication and reflect on how we might continue in compassionate, healthy, covenanted community.

And as individuals, let's consider how we can move through 2024 with care for our neighbors, care for our community, care for those whose names we don't even know, and care for ourselves.

All this brings us to Jesus and our text this morning.

Jesus is with the crowds - in relationship to people. He's walking along with them. He's sitting down at the table with tax collectors and sinners. He's developing one on one relationships with people like Levi. Jesus is present, not anonymous. He's relational, not combative. He is compassionate. While he's very clear on his principles, he's also willing to kindly engage. "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."

What might our Jesus-following, 2024-acknowledging practices look like?

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<sup>2</sup> Life Together

Individually, we might set a resolution of caution when engaging social media and cable news. We might observe carefully the impact on our hearts and spirits when we've scrolled too long or the sound of the news anchor gives us a belly cramp. And if we are content creators or commenters: we *should* treat people online the way we want to be treated, online or in real life.

This is not to say we should just stay silent about things that matter or put our heads in the sand or be ill informed. But we can be well enough informed after twenty minutes reading a reputable newspaper, online or off. Don't read the comment section. We can check to see whether our cousin is out of the hospital in two minutes on social media, not an hour. When we get stressed we might tend to that stress rather than letting it eat us up. (I have a great resource on that - ask me.)<sup>3</sup>

We might pause to breathe.

We might seek out real life, kind and thoughtful social interactions. You know, like at church, or men's group, or choir.

We might practice curiosity.

And we might pray for everyone - Jesus said, love our enemies and pray for those who curse us. This might be the hardest thing Jesus ever asked of us. Yet, in praying for those with whom we have deep disagreement, we might continue to see their common humanity rather than dismissing them. A leader of the Corrymeela Center recently said, "We can stand against injustice without dehumanizing anyone....we can refuse to be enemies."<sup>4</sup> This follows Dr. King's principles of nonviolence as well.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Burnout: Completing the Stress Cycle by Amelia and Emily Nagoski

<sup>4</sup> On a 2023 Advent Peacemaking meeting

<sup>5</sup> <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

For our community for our community here in Pilgrim Church and for every community we are each part of, I think these things will also be important protective factors in 2024.

Remember relationship. Remember the love and kindness and history we share. Be intentional about seeing every person as a beloved child of God.

It's good for us to remember our communications covenant on days other than Annual Meeting. Since 2020, we've promised to seek the Spirit's wisdom as we reflect on, and make decisions about, the ministry of Pilgrim Church.

And to

- Look for joy, reinforce our strengths, and recognize the accomplishments of this community
- Listen with care in order to understand
- Practice loving communication
- Work to be transparent, clear, and concise in our words
- Try to walk in one another's shoes
- Pause, breathe, and pray if a moment feels challenging
- Look and listen for God in each other
- Assume good intentions
- Collaborate together to bless our neighbors and community
- And be open to constructive feedback offered for the common good.

There are some things that we Pilgrims hold as foundational truths that we should never set aside in the name of calm: we believe in an all loving God, we are committed to following a teacher who was so inclusive he could eat with tax collectors and sinners. We are committed to being an open and affirming congregation that welcomes and respects and values all people, people of *every race, nationality, religious background, educational background, ethnicity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, economic status, and physical, mental, and emotional ability*. We are committed, following Dr. King, that every person should be measured

according to the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. We believe in beloved community as Dr. King dreamed of, and we work toward it. These are not universally held values in our society right now. But even in this we can follow Jesus. When he encountered people with values different from his own he treated them with respect and human dignity.

Pilgrims, we do our best to follow the ways of our teacher - may we continue in 2024 and beyond. Amen.

Carleton College Computer Center User Services Presents:

A  
Guide to the  
**Internet**  
and Beyond

A Guide to Network MAIL, TELNET, FTP,  
and a handful of other useful tips and tricks.

Created by Mark F. Heiman,  
January 1991

**Prerequisites:**

This document assumes no prior experience with using network utilities on the VAX. However, you'll get quite a lot more out of it if you're already somewhat familiar with the basic material covered in *My Very First VAX Book*. If you're fairly comfortable using the VAX, you're probably qualified to understand this book.

A great read: <https://sojo.net/articles/churches-we-need-reconsider-our-facebook-accounts>