

**Transformed at the Table**, a sermon in response to Mark 2:13-22 and Hosea 2:14-20, by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, February 4, 2024.

When Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of All Saints' Church in 1517, the unified Roman Catholic Church would be torn apart – **and it would never be the same again**. Luther actually had no intention of causing a rift in the church, but he felt called by God to protest the sale of indulgences and other unbiblical church practices – practices that solidified the wealth and power of the church itself, by taking advantage of the people. God alone, he argued, could offer forgiveness, and any human – especially a priest – who would offer forgiveness for a *price* – was in error. Salvation is a **gift of God's grace** and it belongs to no mere person to grant or refuse...  
+++ Rather than seriously considering this criticism from their loyal Catholic monk, church officials called Luther to appear before them to answer for what *they* called **his** heresies. They ordered him to recant. But he faithfully refused to do so, saying, "Here I stand. I can do no other." +++ And so, Martin Luther was excommunicated from the church. – His writings were banned. – And a warrant was issued for his arrest. +++ **The all-powerful church had not been prepared for this theological truth. – It threatened the very foundations of their ecclesiastical empire – and so they fought back – very quickly and very harshly.** +++++ +++++

Just 26 years after Luther nailed his theses, Nicolaus Copernicus published his book *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, in 1543. And humankind's understanding of the world **would never be the same again**. Copernicus put forward, with convincing astronomy and math, that the earth is actually *not* the center of the universe. In fact, the earth rotates around the sun – not the sun around the earth. Copernicus died shortly after publishing his book, before those same guardians of traditional thinking – the church and its Inquisition – could come after him. +++ But when **Galileo** later stepped forward and *supported* the theory, they arrested **him**. They convicted him of heresy for what they called absurd philosophies that "contradict in many places the sense of Holy Scripture." Galileo was forced to recant and he spent the rest of his life under house arrest. +++ **Once again, the elite and powerful had not been ready for this scientific truth – it pulled the rug out from under them and their dogma, their authority as arbiters as truth, – and so they fought back - hard.**

These are just *two* people who turned their worlds upside down. – Two people who challenged the established order by pursuing truth or justice, **and the world would never be the same again** – but there are many, many others, people like Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders of this nation, Charles Darwin, Susan B. Anthony, Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela..., and the list goes on.

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I think the Scribes and the Pharisees in today's gospel lesson could sympathize with the Pope and the Inquisition that tried to bring down Copernicus's science and Luther's theology – as **they are not ready for Jesus' divine truth**. – It turns **their** world upside down. – **And it will never be the same again**. +++ After telling people not to talk about him and forbidding demons from saying his name, word of Jesus has finally gotten out and throngs of people are following him... And in the verses just before today's reading, Jesus finally had his first encounter with Jewish authorities, – a group of Scribes who saw him **heal** a paralytic and proclaim his **sins** to be forgiven. – To the scribes, that was a heresy. >>> Just who **IS** this mysterious man who had appeared in the desert, and has been breaking their rules ever since? +++ Now, of all people, Jesus calls **Levi** to follow him. Levi is a tax collector who **stooped so low** as to interact with *Gentiles* everyday while doing his job. How unclean! So far, Jesus has just called the Jewish fishermen Simon, Andrew, James, and John as disciples. – Those dirty laborers are bad enough – **but Levi???** Tax collectors are collaborators with Rome! And now, Jesus has gone to his house to **eat** with him – *and other sinners*. +++ You know, at first, I don't think the Scribes were really trying to hurt Jesus or even argue with him. – I think they are genuinely **perplexed** when they ask, "**Why** does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" – I mean those others could be thieves, prostitutes, and liars... +++ ... Why would Jesus **eat** with them? +++ And then he answers them with an old Jewish proverb they are sure to recognize – "The physician *always* goes to the **sick**" – And **this** physician is not concerned about catching the diseases of sin – instead he will share his **own** purity with **them** and make them whole. +++ And he adds – "**I have come to call not the righteous [as if there really were any truly righteous people] – but I come for sinners.**" +++ Jesus speaks to them with words that sound like things the *Messiah* would say, – like someone sent with a mission and the power to *call* others. – **I think it's about this time that they begin to realize the ones he is calling are not the elite like THEMSELVES.** He's attracting anyone and

everyone who will follow. +++ ***The kingdom of God has arrived*** and it is a ***banquet*** where **EVERYONE is invited!** +++ It's for the sinners,... the outcast,... the rejected. +++ ***The world is changing*** – and these tax collectors and sinners are ready to change with it. – ***They are ready...*** ready to come to the table with Jesus, – and to leave **their sins behind.** – ... +++ The scribes are **left standing there, stunned**. They weren't prepared to have the rug pulled out from under them like this. It's time to bring in reinforcements. **It's time to go talk to the Pharisees.**

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Next, we learn that John's disciples and the Pharisees are fasting – but Jesus and his disciples are not. Why would **that** be? +++ You see, the Pharisees taught the people to fast regularly as part of their religious practices, though this was not required by the Law... And John – who ***had been*** at the *cutting edge* of reforming religious practices – was teaching his disciples to fast in atonement for their sins. – It was a way to repent – **and to prepare for the arrival of the kingdom.** +++ But Jesus and his disciples were not preparing for the kingdom – **they were celebrating the kingdom that had already arrived.** It had arrived with the appearance of Jesus that day in the wilderness. He ushered in the kingdom – and ***he*** is the bridegroom. **WHY WOULD THEY fast?** +++ +++ +++ Jesus is making the world **new** again. He's changing everything, forever. +++ The Pharisees, and even John the Baptist, are left standing **in the past.** More and more – it's clear that ***Jesus*** is the **path to the future.** +++ **And the Pharisees soon begin to push back – hard!**

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**So, we've found another breadcrumb!** You'll remember our journey since Epiphany. – We've learned a little more each week about this Mystery Man in the Wilderness who wants his miracles to remain secret and does not allow demons to say his name. But for him to be so secretive, we've learned a lot about him, haven't we? – Even though, today, we just now, ***finally***, landed in chapter 2. +++ We've learned Jesus is the Son of God and blesses us with the Holy Spirit through baptism. We've learned that he turns the world upside down and ushers in the kingdom of God, that he was a serious threat to the authorities, and that God's very nature – the active Power of Love – is revealed in him. We've learned that Jesus ***desperately*** loves each and every one of us, and will never abandon us. +++ And NOW – ***NOW*** we learn that he is making the world new. – Jesus is calling **US** to **join** his new creation. – Calling us into reconciliation with God – despite our sins – healed by the divine doctor who tends to us... – AND INVITING us to the banquet table to celebrate the kingdom with him – as bumped and bruised as we may be.

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Jesus is calling us to be transformed in him... ***Transformed*** ... he says, like Levi and the other sinners around the table with Jesus... ***Transformed***... like old cloth must be before it can stand the new patches of Christ, mending our holes... ***Transformed*** ... like the old wineskin must be before it can carry the new wine of Christ without bursting... Jesus does not want to ***throw away*** what we have been – he does not talk about ***throwing away*** the old cloth or old wineskins – he wants **to be sure** they are **not lost.** +++ Jesus Christ offers to make us new again – like a caterpillar made new in its chrysalis – so we can enjoy our **new lives** in his kingdom, – ***called... to the eternal banquet table*** – with Jesus, the bridegroom.

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This kind of **reconciliation to a new life with God** is also the message of today's Old Testament reading. Hosea symbolizes Israel as the Lord's unfaithful spouse, – a spouse who has turned to false idols – ignored the law – and turned its back on God. +++ But rather than punishment – rather than voiding the covenant that binds the Lord to Israel – God offers reconciliation: +++ The Lord calls Israel back to the wilderness... where they first fell in love – where the law and the covenant had both been born. – There, God will allure them and remind Israel why they fell in love in the first place. And there, Hosea tells us, “She shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.”

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My friends, **Christ came to make us whole again.** That... ***simple... truth... changed the world forever*** – more than any theologian or any revolutionary changes to the Church – more than any physicist or mathematics of astronomy. – **Christ came to make us whole again.** His call to reconciliation **only** threatens us if we are stuck in the past, stuck with the Pharisees and the Inquisition, – desperately holding onto our old dogmas – our old habits – our old prejudices – our resentments – and anger. We only feel threatened by Jesus when we reject his truth instead of celebrating our new life in him. +++ So today, I invite you to let go **of the past** – and celebrate with Christ at the **banquet of the kingdom.** +++++ In remembrance of Him. +++++

Like Levi and the sinners whom Jesus feasted with at that table long ago... Christ does not invite you to **THIS** table because you are righteous or perfectly pure... +++ on the contrary, he invites you precisely **because you are not**... He invites you today with *these* words... “Come to me, ***all you*** that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. +++ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” +++ You – ALL of you – are invited to his table – today and every day. +++ Be transformed!

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.