



Rev. George Ragsdale  
“Torn Open”  
Mark 2:13-17, 23-28  
September 6, 2009

Two weeks ago, as we were beginning our look at the Gospels in this Year Through The Bible, we heard Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. Jesus goes down into the water and, Mark tells us, “just as he was coming up...he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” In Jesus Christ, God comes, opens the heavens and love and mercy and grace begin to flow freely through him.

Mark’s choice of words is striking. He doesn’t say the clouds were peacefully and gently rolled back and heavens were opened. No, he says they were “torn apart.” The word is *schitzo* in Greek, where we get the word *schism*. The heavens were ripped, split, torn open. The New Testament Scholar Joel Marcus says that in Jesus, “God has ripped the heavens irrevocably apart... never to shut them again. Through this gracious gash in the universe, he has poured his Spirit into the earthly realm.”

There’s something harsh, violent confrontational in that language: a “gracious gash.” In Jesus, God has ripped open the heavens. God is on the loose. We’d better watch out.

Mark’s Gospel kind of unfolds in that way. It’s only Chapter 2 and already we begin to see what that tearing open, that ripping apart looks like in Jesus. Jesus tears through Capernaum: healing sinners, eating with tax collectors, breaking the Sabbath laws. Everything changes with Jesus. Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee in Capernaum and he spots Levi, a tax collector, and calls out to him, “Follow me!”

It doesn’t stop there. Jesus ends up at Levi’s house where Levi has decided to throw this huge party, inviting all of his friends, the “tax collectors and sinners.” In this passage, you might’ve noticed that over and over Mark says “tax collectors and sinners,” “tax collectors and sinners,” “tax collectors and sinners.” Mark wants to make sure we get it. Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. They’re all having a good time, enjoying themselves. It’s a really good party. John Perceval was an Australian painter and he painted this picture called “Christ Dining at Young and Jackson’s.” Young and Jackson’s was – still is – a famous pub in Melbourne.

When this painting was first unveiled, it was offensive. Christ eating in a pub? In a bar? Perceval’s painting shows this raucous scene with people everywhere, a barrel of beer rolling across the floor, a dog under the table, a waitress swinging across the room with chicken and potatoes for everyone. It’s hard when you look at that painting to tell who Jesus is, at first. Then you realize he’s sitting at the table – at the center of the table, having a grand time.

Paintings like this, artists like this, really help us get at what’s happening in this passage, the offensiveness of Jesus’ actions, eating with tax collectors and sinners – cutting our expectations of him to the core.

Mark says Jesus was “reclining” at Levi’s table – the kind of thing you’d do at a long, drawn-out Roman banquet. Jesus hasn’t just politely accepted Levi’s invitation, stayed for hors d’oeuvres and then left. He “reclines” with them. He enjoys their company, accepts them, welcomes them – tax collectors and sinners.

Mark says that when the Pharisees saw Jesus with them, they began to grumble, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” They are upset, angered by Jesus eating with those

who are unclean, those whose lives have strayed so far from God. It just rips them up, tears them up inside.

Pharisees get a bad rap so much of the time. Keeping lines and divisions were their attempt to be faithful. Tax collectors were sellouts: small-time racketeers who took advantage of anyone and everyone. But it's easy to get caught up in the rules, easy to get caught up in that "who's right, who's wrong, who's in, who's out?" game. It's easy to forget that the people on the other side of the line are *people*. It props us up, makes us feel better. The poet Carl Sandburg once said when asked, "What is the ugliest word in the human language?" "The ugliest word in the human language is... 'exclusive.'" It's almost like, if you want to be accepted some place, you have to meet this criteria and that criteria and that criteria. We end up treating each other more like rivals, enemies and competitors. If you're out, then I'm in. If God's not with you, then God's *surely* with me.

Ed Sanders, one of my religion professor as an undergraduate at Duke, always loved to point out that in these stories of Jesus eating and drinking with sinners, there's never an indication that he called them to repentance or any indication that they changed their lifestyles. Somehow I gather that, at least in those moments, it wasn't the point. The point was simply to say – to people who'd been on the other side of a line for so long, "God loves you, I love you, and you are part of God's kingdom!"

With Jesus sitting there, eating with tax collectors and sinners, God is ripping open the heavens with a word of welcome, an offer of forgiveness, an invitation to relationship. Like a child tearing through wrapping paper on Christmas – God comes to us, tearing through our expectations of the way God works, tearing through the social fabric that divides and separates, tearing open our hearts – opening us to receive him, opening us to receive each other. And it's hard. If you open an envelope you can close it again, just the way it was. But if you tear it open, it will never be the same again. It's hard – this new way, this new world of Jesus.

"Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" they ask. Jesus responds by saying that those who are well have no need of a physician. "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners." In other words, Jesus is asking, "Where do you expect me to be?"

Where do you expect me to be? Where does Jesus expect us to be? It's interesting, Mark first uses the word "disciple" in his Gospel in this passage – referring to those who join him at Levi's house for dinner. It's not when the 12 are all assembled, or when they're at the Last Supper. No. Being a disciple means your world has been ripped open your life has been ripped open – and you have nowhere else to go, nowhere else to be but there – with Jesus.

Where does Jesus expect us to be? What kind of community does Jesus expect Myers Park to be? A stone fortress with beautiful landscaping and beautiful windows and beautiful people, all of us showing up on Sunday and nicely, neatly filing in from our cars and then filing back out to our nice, neat beautiful lives? Or a place that's a little messy, a little loud, maybe a little confrontational? A place where it looks like, right at the corner of Providence and Queens, that God has ripped open the heavens so that grace and mercy and welcome and acceptance and love flow freely from these walls?

I've had people tell me, when I've asked them to church, "I can't go to church. My life is such a mess." We give the impression sometimes that coming to church is about seeing who has their life together the most. We come in on Sunday and think we've got to give that impression to everybody. "Don't worry about me, everything's A OK," instead of coming together and saying, "Look, I'm broken in pieces. I don't know how to make it without some help. I don't know how to make it without Jesus. I don't know how to make it without you."

There's a wonderful story about this woman who spoke at a church convention back in the 1960s. She got up and spoke about her life as an alcoholic and her subsequent conversion to Christ. When she finished, the whole conference treated her to a standing ovation. The woman returned to the microphone and said, "Now you know you are not applauding... me. That's just the Jesus in you meeting the Jesus in me."

"The Jesus in you meeting the Jesus in me." Jesus comes to us: Pharisees, tax collectors, sinners – he comes to us and tears through our divisions of race and class and status, he tears through our world, rips open our lives and our hearts, and he gives us grace. He gives us each other.

Every Thursday, we partner with our sister congregation at South Tryon Community Church in a ministry called "Trinity's Table." Volunteers from both our churches come together to serve a meal to those who are hungry in the community around South Tryon Church. This past Thursday they fed more than 110 people.

That's really remarkable – it does a lot of good, helps a lot of people. But what's really remarkable is how the meal gets prepared and served each week. A couple of years ago, there was a cook who was paid to fix the meal. Budgets have been cut, and last year we weren't sure how to continue at first. But people from South Tryon and people from Myers Park came together and they are making it happen. The great thing is this isn't a ministry where we've tried to say, "Let us do this for you, South Tryon. We want to help you, do this for you." Instead, we've tried to say, "Hey, can we do this with you? Can we come alongside you and work with you?" When we do it that way, the relationships become as important as any meal that's ever served.

It's been beautiful to watch. Sometimes it's messy. Sometimes it's hard. If you've ever tried cooking with another person, you know what I mean. There are different styles, different tastes, different ways of cooking. It's messy, it's hard – but it's beautiful. Every Thursday, people who might never have met, divided by every category the world uses to define and categorize us, coming together to share a meal with those who are hungry in Charlotte.

On Thursday, I was over at South Tryon as the meal was ending and our volunteers were there with some of the folks from South Tryon standing around the serving line. And there was joking and laughter, a bit of teasing back and forth. Just people getting to know each other, beginning to care for each other, coming to accept each other in spite of what the world says makes them different.

I sat there, watching from across the room, and I thought to myself, "This is just the kind of thing Jesus loves to do – tearing in, opening our lives, giving us new friends, letting love and acceptance flow among us."