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## ***“Reimagined: House”***

*Part III of the Sermon Series, “Reimagined.”*

*Mark 2:13-17*

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### **Introduction**

Several years ago, I taught an adult Sunday School series on the four gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth. During that 4-week Advent class, we considered four illustrations from the mind of pastor and author Cynthia Campbell. In her book *Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes*, she describes what each gospel “house” would look like. In other words, based on the details left in or out of a given gospel, she described how each one might appear if it were actually a physical home. Use your imaginations with me for a moment...

**Matthew** – The Gospel of Matthew presents the Jesus who fulfills Judaic prophesy. It acknowledges the great ancestors of the Jewish faith but alludes to the violence and conflict of its historical context. To create a visual, picture that house in your childhood neighborhood or town that was grand and beautiful but a little spooky. Picture a gothic—revival house— big and traditional, maybe a little dramatic and even mysterious. Just looking at it from the outside, you knew there could be secret rooms and forgotten memories deep inside.

**John** – The Gospel of John is packed with theological constructs and symbolic gestures; it endeavors to shine a great light into the darkness around it. John might be described as a very modern house with lots of glass and a geometry that emphasizes its juxtaposition against the landscape. Once you see this imaginary gospel house, you are drawn in and invited to explore its



surprises and mysteries, just like the Gospel of John invites readers to ponder the multiple meanings of its carefully chosen words.

**Luke** – Luke is the Gospel from which we glean the most detail around the Christmas story, for instance. And to Luke, a dining room table is of the utmost importance. It wouldn't be fancy, but it would be the kind of home where you might smell delicious food being prepared, the sound of children playing, a place for people to gather. Picture a home with a large covered front porch, a house where everyone is welcome.

**Finally, Mark** – In contrast to the big, traditional beauty of Matthew, the warm inviting light of John, and the sprawling outdoor, front porch table of Luke, Mark's house is much simpler. The first Gospel written, Mark lacks some of the embellishment the later gospels add. If we were to picture Mark as a house, it'd probably be a lot less like the ones we are naturally drawn to – and more like the ones that actually existed in first century CE. Consider the basic essentials of a “house”—picture a spare simple home, because Mark is kind of police detective who says, “Just the facts, ma'am.” His house has just what it needs and not much more: a door, a couple of widows, a chimney, a place to sleep, a place to eat.

### Mark 2:13-17

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.’

### Sermon

As we've established, things happen fast in Mark. The Gospel writer doesn't mince words. At the start of our passage, Jesus is teaching, then walking, then calling Levi. Flash forward to dinner at Levi's house, lots of people around the table, and the Pharisees getting judgy. We read only five short verses, and things are rolling.

It's particularly interesting, then, that Mark, who doesn't chew his cud twice, shares the same phrase three times in these five verses. Did you catch it? He uses “sinners and tax collectors/tax collectors and sinners” three times. Given that the phrase pops up so often in these few verses, I think we can safely conclude that Mark is trying to point out something important to us. So, let's take a quick look at just who these people are.



First, the tax collectors. Tax collectors in Jesus' day are men from the Jewish community that the Romans recruited to collect the taxes funding the Roman Empire from their neighbors. They're not great. These people were given quotas and whatever they collected above their quotas they could keep, no questions asked. This means that not only were tax collectors considered traitors to their people for working with the occupying forces, they also often profited from the losses of their neighbors. It's not hard to see why tax collectors aren't all that popular.

Next, the sinners. Mark is not using the term "sinners" as we might today – to designate anyone who has sinned. Rather, Mark is describing a class of persons who are at the social and moral bottom of the ladder. These are the bandits, and the prostitutes, and the murderers. These are the absolute lowest of society.

Now, imagine that one of your pastors has been hanging out almost entirely with these folks, sinners and tax collectors/tax collectors and sinners. We can gather how Jesus was perceived by the first-century equivalent of the presbytery or a church session. We can see why they wondered what on earth was going on. You see your pastors hanging out in seedy bars or with a shady character about town and you might start wondering, too.

In true Mark form, the Gospel writer doesn't tell us much about the tax collector Levi. But there are a few things commentators have deduced. Ben Witherington writes that we can gauge in the Greek that Levi is not an income tax or poll tax collector. Rather, he was some sort of customs official—perhaps placed at bridges, canals and on state roads, or a tax farmer collecting from the farms in the region. As a tax collector in Capernaum where fishing was a commodity regularly taxed, he was probably already well known and likely despised by the other disciples Jesus has already called, Simon and Andrew, Jacob and John.<sup>i</sup>

Almost as quickly as he is called, Levi has Jesus to his home for a dinner party. The context implies that Levi arranged a banquet to celebrate his call to discipleship.<sup>ii</sup> The tax collectors are there with sinners – these aren't the poor, downtrodden, or meek. Jesus isn't accused of merely associating with the ritually unclean or ritually unobservant, rather he is banqueting with the bad. It's no wonder the scribes and Pharisees wonder how Jesus could indeed be a godly man, much less a man sent by God.

There's little more important to the Gospel writers than a dinner table and exactly who is seated around it. Aside from the Last Supper and maybe the Feeding of the 5,000, the Gospels pay no attention to what is served at these meals. What matters most in the Gospels is who's around that table.

In Levi's home, I picture Jesus and his disciples (getting past their dislike for their new fellow follower). I picture Levi's tax collector pals or colleagues. I picture women and men who made their way in the world ignoring (by choice or misfortune) the religious and cultural norms of their neighbors. To their community, these people sit outside the synagogue, and therefore outside of



God's grace. The beauty of this banquet around Levi's dining table is that these people who were "out" are "in."

Mark's house might be a simple house, but what it breaks open for us is both liberating and welcoming; and at the same time for some of us foreign and distasteful. In the home Mark presents, the tax collector is the host. Breaking bread together are sinners of the worst sort; kosher laws are almost certainly an afterthought.

It's not lost on me that the earliest Christian communities, churches, began in homes like these – with people like these. According to Acts, the Apostle Paul's congregations were typically based in individual homes. The owner of the house, like Levi for instance, was a kind of wealthy patron. The folks that filled the home for worship would be the host's immediate family, servants, some neighbors, and even clients and business partners. In Levi's case, tax collectors and sinners/sinners and tax collectors.

The worship of an early Christian house church centered around the dinner table. They would not have sat facing forward as we do in our sanctuary, but rather they would be in someone's dining room and the center activity would be the fellowship and meal around the table.

Worship in the home meant sitting next to one another and brushing arms, passing the bread and sharing the olive oil. It meant laughing together and crying together, exchanging stories, ideas, discussing scripture, and sharing dreams.

For years, Nadia Bolz-Weber led her life on the periphery of faith. Struggling to find her way into church, in 2004 she was asked to lead a funeral in a comedy club for a friend and fellow comedian who had taken his own life. Nadia, tattooed and just coming out of ten years of alcohol and drug abuse sensed a sincere call to seek out others like herself, who felt they didn't belong. Finding her spiritual and ecclesiastical home in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the ELCA), she was drawn to Martin Luther's theological understanding *simil justus et peccator*, Latin for "at the same time just and a sinner."

By 2007, Nadia started a church in her home in Denver, later to be called the House for All Sinners and Saints – called the House, for short. Now an ordained pastor in the ELCA, she speaks not just to social, cultural, or theological outsiders, but to those of us who may look like we're "in" but we feel like we've always been "outsiders" in one way or another. Several years ago, in an interview with Huffington Post, Nadia was asked about the kinds of people that filled her "pews" – like someone she calls Billy, an early member of the House – a man who struggled with addiction, played the piano, a beloved child of God who sometimes wore his sister's dresses. Nadia shared:

*I've just become more and more confused about how Christianity became what it is today, given how it started. It just keeps puzzling me. It didn't start with the religious authorities. It didn't start with the people for whom life was easy. It didn't start with people who were nailing whatever purity system was being handed to*



*them at the time. It started with rank fishermen and prostitutes and tax collectors — people for whom life wasn't easy. And yet that's whom Jesus chose to surround himself with.<sup>iii</sup>*

Nadia left the House for All Sinners and Saints in 2018, and now serves as an author and public theologian. Over the years, the church she founded has grown to a community of over 500. You'd better believe she caught some flak for this “unorthodox” way of being church in its earlier years. It was unusual, and it attracted the “unusual” and the “outsiders.” Interestingly, as the church grew, it became evident that those who felt like “outsiders” weren't just the tattooed, pierced, and community in recovery—it was also couples and families, Baby Boomers, folks in their 70's and 80's, and young single adults.<sup>iv</sup>

If you were a kosher Jew in first century CE, then it was pretty clear who was “in” and who was “out.” You either towed the cultural and religious lines, or you didn't.

Today, it's not so easy to sense who *feels* “in” and who *feels* “out.” It's hard to accept the welcome and hospitality – to know that Jesus not only welcomes all, but that Jesus welcomes all of us – all that I am, all that *you* are. In his house, Jesus loves us as we are—even, as Nada Bolz-Weber puts it ...

*Even that within us we wish to hide: the part that cursed at our children this week, or drank alone, or has a problem with lying, or hates our body. That part within us that suffers from depression and can't admit it, or is too fearful to give our money away, or is riddled with shame over our sexuality, or cheats on taxes. All these parts of us we wish Jesus had the good sense to not welcome to his table are invited [in].<sup>v</sup>*

It is as hard for us to believe it now as it was for the Pharisees to believe it then when they looked through Levi's front door.

*<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.'*

These tax collectors and sinners weren't nameless men and women without families or histories. They may indeed have been people who were trapped, one way or another, by the situations into which they were thrust. What if they never imagined growing up to extort their neighbors or sell their bodies? What if they knew all the ways they'd disappointed their families and were despised by their neighbors? These people in Levi's home, they weren't like the two-dimensional villains in a comic book.

We can imagine the impact of Jesus' message of forgiveness and mercy, acceptance and grace can have. He not only preached this message to the crowds, but he lived it out in his eagerness to spend time with them, eat with them, to accept their hospitality and actually be seen with them. It makes sense why they were attracted to him and followed him. And it makes sense



why he chose to go to *them*, not to the ones who think they've got it all figured out. After all, only the sick need physicians, and only those who know they are in need are eager for help.

Wherever Jesus goes, he turns norms and expectations upside-down. From the outside, Mark's house might look simple—but looking *in*, as the Pharisees saw, it is a glorious scene not just of a hodgepodge banquet table way back then—but of a Table to come.

So, let's share the reputation of Jesus and welcome those who the religious love to hate—the dreamers and doubters, the gay and lesbian, the divorcee and single, the addicted and self-loathing. Let's make enough room for people of all political persuasions, all ethnicities, and all religious backgrounds. Let's invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame, so that our house may always be full.

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<sup>i</sup> Ben Witherington, III. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

<sup>ii</sup> Witherington.

<sup>iii</sup> Jesse James DeConto » [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-pastor-nadia-bolz-weber-thinks-church-is-for-losers\\_n\\_560afcfee4b0dd850309a31a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-pastor-nadia-bolz-weber-thinks-church-is-for-losers_n_560afcfee4b0dd850309a31a) «

<sup>iv</sup> <https://houseforall.org/who-we-are/>

<sup>v</sup> Debie Thomas, "Bread of Heaven," posted July 29, 2018. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1855-bread-of-heaven>

