THE NEW WINE OF JESUS[1] MINISTRY
Paul Santmire, Sept. 21, 1975

Several years ago an ad appeared in a number o£ New England papers describing a new real estate development in Florida called "Baldwin Heights." It was lavishly presented, including mention of a gKlf course, swimming pools, and a penthouse dining room. It soi^happened that the National Better Business Bureau checked it out — only to discover that Baldwin Heights was ■uwasSBy swampland, most of which was under murky xSasaaRk expanses of stagnant water.

Such experiences, which abound in our society generally and sometimes in our own lives as well, make it difficult for us to appreaiate fully the new wine of Jesus[1] ministry. The media are full of announcements of new cars, new deoderants, and new gHKHX lifestyles, all of them promising happiness.

Some social critics have argued, indeed, that the compulsive quewt for novelty in our society — new gadgets, new bombs, new shopping centers, nw opiates everyday, new ways of doing or making the same old thing'-- that all 'this fixation on newness is a sign of our society's advanced state of decadence. They argue that it's all a vast social delusion: the claims are for happiness and progress,' in fact our country iand is like a vast swampland, mostly covered with murky, stagnant water. The truth of the matter seems to be that, in there is nofahina new under the sun; in fact, it's always the same story^'over^^ncT'over again

Be that as it may, the public evangelists of newness are around us, filling our airwaves, often with dribble,, if not with delusion. So I invite you this morning to try to out the noise of all those cacapjpnous American commercials for novelty, and to try to hear afresh the still small voice of God speaking to us in this morning's text.

What is this new wine of Jesus' ministry?

I.

As I thought about the parable of the new wine in the fresh wineskins this week, I began to phantasize about all manner of possible meanings itmight haye for us. The theme of newness, as you know, is presen1?^Hv>the New Testament to the point of overflowing. We're told about a new covenant, a new age, a new song, a new commandment, even a new heavens and a new earth.

I'm sure that our text implies all these things, and more. Yet the more I looked at the text itself, injLts context, the more I began to see that it contains its own meaning, primarily anyway; that it's not general teaching about newness as some kind of religious principle.

The immediately accessible meaning of the parable of the new wine, I began to conclude, is to be found right before our eyes, in the xminx preceding account of Jesus' encounter with the tax collector Levi.

"...He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at thre tax office. And he said to him, "'Follow me.' And he left everything and rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house. And there was a large company of tax collectors and others sitting at table with them."

II.

Consider first the tax collectors. As you know, they were among the most despised persons in first century Judaism. They were among the most visible of those JewjS who had bought into the hated Roman system, in one way or another. They had daily commerce with the alien gentile world and to that degree, at least, were supporters of Roman might and Roman oppression, ^xMsLhsx whether that was welded directly or through puppet rul&rs like Herod.

It doesn't take tqpmuch imagination, either, to think of theses* collectors pgop-hc as men prone to be "on the take," people who were constantly tempted to grow rich at the expense of others, and who sometimes, if not regularly, gave in to the temptation. No wonder tax collectors are mentioned in the New Testament almost always with "sinners," almost as if the two terms were synonymous.

As Levi's story unfolds before us, Jesus emerges into his world — Jesus sees him, sitting in front of the tax office, Die proper and understandable attitude for a good Jew wouftd/*7^^ would be to shift his^glance elsewhere. understandably 5V.

Last November I happened to be in Washington for a meeting right in the midst of the whole Watergate thing. I was wandering around near Georgetown university, looking at government buildings aHdxxHXHn the State Department, and so on. Scarcely noticing where I was going, I suddenly found myself exploring a huge apartment complex — shades of Ba^d^ heights, with many fine shops, outdoor cafes, and so on. (&n4 ^ I said to myself before too long/' I wonder whether this is the Watergate apai/feents? It was. I hastened on my way, being one who basically wants to love the country of his birth.

\ But here's Levi, sitting out in front of the WHtergate^ building, J* - as it were, and Jesus sees him. The Greek word heisPsiWests a / personal kind of seeing/E deep kind of RKKSHaixREt^EHxnxxKpx human / concern; for example, like seeing the glory of God in the face of i) ""~Tesus}\ So Jesus sees Levi — I take it that this means that his eyes fest on^jiarf compassionately, as a human being.

This past summer a certain older woman was wandering around this campus late at night and was questioned — sensitively, I'm happy to report — by our campus police. It turned out that she had no home, no money, that she hadn't eaten for awhile, and had no place to go that night or any night.

After considering a number of possibilities — by then it was three in the morning and a call had reached me — we decided to put in a call to Rosie's place downtown. Most of you know RKKEK3E Rose's place, at least in name, from our Sunday offerings. I explained the situation to the woman who answered the phone, and then I apologized (%o¥TCistun herein the middle of the night. "No," she said wikh soft Irish ."that's whakxwu^xuxknxLxLuxuxkx okay. That's what we're here for."

In this respect Rosie's place is a living parable of the new wine of Jesus' ministry. For his ministry was predicated on forgiveness Jesus sought out the outcasts of society and befriended them. He accepted them and loved them, as he Found them. His whole life was one beautifully open, open-door policy.

That means for you and for me, too, I hasten to add, lower case sinners though we may be. This is the existential meaning of our text, which is very much part of its concreteness. It£fis^_saying that Jesus seeks us_ out, too, that he befriends us, just as we are. I mean, you don't have to take law boaads for Jesus. You don't have to be a shining example of academic excellence. You don't have to be a moral 11T'Lu Ui. heroine. You don't have to dress up those XEH»E bitter feelings^nfiside you, in Sunday clothes^ in order to be with in' Jesus.

Jesus sees us. He has compassion on you and me, as we are, with all our foibles and failures and frustrations. The new wine of Jesus?ministry is predicated on forgiveness, for you and Lor me, as well as for more visible uppercase sinners like Levi.

III.

Now Levi responds to Jesus' invitation to come along, Luke tells us, by forsaking all things and fsiiswx beginning to follow Jesus. If we were to consider the full dimensions of the story we'd have to RHH reflect on this carefully. But one of the advantages of having a lectionary, as we do^ is that weftfcnow ahead of time that other sermons along the way will be dealing with the Lukan theme of giving up our wealth and following Jesus. So I can pass them by this morning.

I can proceed immediately to the climax of the story. If XkEXHSKXwxHEX Jesus's ministry is predicated on forgiveness, it's consummated in festivity. Levi gets up,andxfHiiHW gives away everything,,,and follows Jesus. ' Then, the first Xhxingx thing he^dp^ ^is ~'ahuge party, —— a great banquet e f or" scores $- --------- ^^taxco lie ctors and other sinners?^ Levi's experience of Jesus' J was xBtMsdxxkx consummated in festivity.

Imagine what it must have been like. From the point of view of the religious extablishment of the time^^as we know from the reported grumbling of the scribes and the pharisees, it must have appeared to have been a pious hoax of repulsive proportions. Jesus, a self-styled teacher of Israel, was consorting with a house full of sinners//) n k4ad. of religious speak-ea-sy,[5]^ SchSeidXff Center on-Saturday nightr But that's the outsider's perspective.

From the point of view of an insider, it was surely qnxxLx quite different. Remember the moving tones of Mary Magdalene in Jeans Christ Superstar:

> "I don't know how to love him... I've been changed. In these past few days, when I've seen myself, I seem like someone else. I don't know how to take this..."

Here we are at this banquet, the •■iPt of the earth, the stagnant swampland of society. Here we are gathered together with this Jesus, who loves us. Here we experience the God who creates us and sustains us drawing near to us in our isolation to accept us as we are,,-#** our brokenness.

A?

My God, could it fee me? Is God really KamxHgxXiaxBix touching my life? That must have been Levi's question. That must have been Mary Magdalene's question. And a host of others'. "Yes," came the answer, surfing from their hearts with joy. "Yes. Yes. Yes. It's really me. * I don't know how to take this."

That's the insider's story of Levi's great banquet for Jesus. What a beautiful thing to happen to me. Even me. What a beautiful thing.

IV.

But that was way back then, wasn't it? Levi, Mary Magdalene, and all those Bible people. Well, yes -- and no.

Let me share a little heresy with you. Actually, I don't really think the idea has been propounded enough to merit the controversy, one way or another. Yet it's a beautiful heresy, if that's what it is.

The idea stems from the xixfcEHHSfckEX sixteenth century Reformer Huldrich Zwingli, as I know it. ZwingliK, at least for a time, apparently, didn't reject the medieval idea of transubstantiafe^ougright. Rather, he relocated it: instead of focusing his attention on the bread and wine on the altar, he kHXHHdxk concerned himself chiefly with the people gathering around the altar. LxxXkexLpxxxLx«LxLkxxxL^ He suggested^ that thaX people gathered around the altar in the Spirit of Christy are transubstantiated into the Body of Christ.

To put this another way: as you and I gather together around the Table, as we see each other's faces and befriend each other, as we rejoice gEuafc together in the Spirit of Christ,and celebrate his compassion in our midst, we become the Body of Christ.

Or, if you prefer, the Whole of our being together this morning, and touching each other, is greater than the sum of its parts. "TKat wholeness, healing,'integrating Spirit that enables us to aing and pray in one voice in this temple, is Christ with us. That's the beautiful Zwinglian heresy I want to share with you, if it be a heresy, which I thoroughly doubt it is.

So this morning, when we take this risk to see each other, as Jesus saw Levi, deeply, face to face, wetasting the new wine of Jesus's ministry. That's the Gospel promise. Gathered together in the Spirit of Christ, veritably, we're transformed into a living chalice of new wine.

So Levi, so Mary Magdalene, welcome! Whether you be an upper case sinner or a lower case sinner. Wherever you've come from, however far you've traveled, for whatever reason, you've come to the right place. Drink deeply, if you will, in this forgiveness and this festivity. Come as you are and rejoice.