

Sometimes it is as simple as being dressed in a suit when others are wearing jeans. Or noticing that everyone here speaks with an accent which means they all hear you as the one with the funny way of talking. Or maybe their clothes were purchased at K MART and yours at Dillard's. Or yours at Walmart and theirs at Saks Fifth Avenue. Maybe you were raised a small town person and they are all big city folks. Or they all speak Spanish and you know not a word. Or their skin is dark, yours is pale. Whatever the reason, sometimes you may sense that you just don't belong. You are not at home. These are not your kind of people.

The question being asked that day was where did Jesus belong? The fact that the Pharisees were asking the question implies that they thought Jesus might belong to them. Like the Pharisees he was a lay person – not clergy like the priests. He was a holy person – not on the side of evil though they would soon be accusing him of that. And like the Pharisees he was popular. But there were differences.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Now for those who were not part of the tax collector and sinner fraternity this group looked like no-goods. Bad people. But I am sure that among themselves there was a sense of belonging just as we might find this within a family in the Mafia or practiced by the bunch that spend every evening at the local bar. I am sure that among the tax collector and sinner crowd that there was lots of talk about the uppity attitude of the Pharisees. “They act like they are so good, think they are better than others. They are just a bunch of hypocrites.” But Jesus joined them at table – not to lecture or criticize – surely the Pharisees would not have objected to that – but for feasting and drinking and laughing.

They asked the disciples – Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? - It was another way of asking why Jesus was spending time with those among whom he did not belong.

Jesus gave them an answer they could not refute – 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.” You don't need me – they do. Now how could the Pharisees find fault with that?

Next it was the people wondering where Jesus belonged. Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast and but your disciples do not fast? The people were assuming that Jesus and his disciples were like John and his disciples and like the Pharisees. But they had different practices – this was confusing. So they asked the question. I am guessing they thought they would get an answer that would argue about the merits of fasting. But Jesus gave another surprising answer: “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them.”

Wherever Jesus was there was feasting – celebration – that there would be sorrow in his presence would be like going on a diet at a wedding reception. Save the diet for tomorrow – now is the time to party!

With every question there was the attempt to find out where Jesus fit in. With every answer Jesus made clear that he could not be squeezed into their ways of belonging: dividing.

“Jesus said, ‘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. 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.’”

What is the old piece of cloth – the brittle old wineskins? Every attempt to see Jesus in the old ways of belonging. Jesus would break bread with the rich and the poor – Jesus would lift a cup with pious ones and with some pretty rough characters. Try to define Jesus by the old ways of belonging and the old cloth will be torn by this patch of fresh cloth – the old wineskins would burst as this new wine ferments.

To understand where Jesus belongs will take a whole new garment – fresh, pliable skins. He won't wear the label Pharisee nor tax collector, he won't be known as one of the John the Baptist crowd nor one of the sinner crowd. Call him the bridegroom – you'll be closer to the truth.

For he is the honored one in every gathering and everyone who sits at table with him will be a friend of the groom. Everyone.

That is how you got into this feast. If you were not a friend of the groom there would be no room at this table for you. There is no fine clothing that will get you served here – no way of talking – no way of acting. But say, I'm a friend of the groom and there will be a seat for you at the head table. For every one of you.

How often, though, I find myself trying to pour this new wine into old ways of thinking. I look for people like me – think my belonging will be greater among them. Too often the churches are just old wineskins of like minded and similar looking people. Think of how many times there is a bursting of the skin – new wine lost – the church left a brittle, empty shell. But when you and I know there is only one way of belonging – to be a friend of the groom and that every friend of the groom belongs to you as much as your own children do, then the ferment of the new wine produces a fine taste indeed. A feast. A party. A wonderful celebration!

Come to that feast – be filled with the new wine. You are a friend of the groom – you belong.