

Sermon for Sunday, June 2, 2024

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15 Psalm 81:1-10 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 Mark 2:23-3:6

The Joy and Justice of Eating

I'm always surprised to find how many of our Bible stories have to do with food. Over and over we meet people who are hungry and occasionally people who are feasting. Remember Ruth and Naomi? They leave their home in Moab in a time of famine, arriving in Israel at harvest time, and the harvest is plentiful. Before long, Ruth has her apron full of grain – a gift from Boaz, and a hint that her womb will also be full of a child by Boaz.

You know the Exodus story when God led the people out of slavery in Egypt. Soon the wandering people are so hungry they want to go back to Egypt. And so the God of mercy sends manna and quails to feed them.

The story of the prophet, Elijah, features an unusual feeding. In a time of famine, God tells him to run away from Israel and hide in a cave. And God commands ravens to feed him bread and meat.

Today we will re-enact that last supper of Jesus and his disciples, a very important meal story in which Jesus gives new meaning to bread and wine.

Today's magazines that feature the healthy Mediterranean diet bear little resemblance to the Mediterranean diet of Jesus' day. In that ancient time, for most of the people, the staples were grains, oil and wine. Bread made up half their calorie input. Vegetables like lentils, chick peas and peas were not readily

available for most of the farm labourers. There was a saying about one vegetable, though: “Woe to the house in which turnip passes.”

Maybe there’d have been dried figs. Fish were plentiful if you lived near the sea, but most of it went to feed the wealthy in cities all over the Empire. The Temple priests ate meat every day from the animals sacrificed but meat was out of reach for ordinary people. So, the Mediterranean diet differed from the modern one. It was hard to get enough calories in that ancient world from bread, oil and wine.

Today’s story from Mark begins on a Sabbath Day. No rain forecast. Bright sunshine, for it’s the dry season. Jesus and the disciples are travelling around towns in Galilee.

They’re doing *what*, you might ask. *They’re not at home protecting their womenfolk?* Jesus has begun his preaching and healing tour and he’s already healed on the Sabbath, casting out demons, restoring a paralytic, healing a leper. He’s doing work on the Sabbath, say the Pharisees. From the time of Moses and the Ten Commandments this was the law: no work on the sabbath. By Jesus’ day there were 613 laws, many spelling out what constituted work on the Sabbath. Carrying even a handkerchief on the Sabbath was work.

Of Jesus’ disciples it could be said that plucking heads of grain was harvesting and so, forbidden. Eating it outdoors without ritual hand washing was clearly unlawful. And when the Pharisees observe this scene – they’re like the secret service, they’re always watching – they chastise Jesus: Why are your disciples doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?

Thus challenged, and with his honour at stake, Jesus reminds them of the time when their great King David broke the law so that he and his hungry companions could eat. Then Jesus says, “The sabbath was made for humankind not humankind for the sabbath. “ Referring to himself, he says, “the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

As we can see, Jesus is teaching the Sabbath laws to the very people who made the laws, all 613 of them, and jealously guard them. It’s as if he’s telling them what really matters on the sabbath: mercy matters. The sabbath is about meeting human need. So if we fall into the trap of thinking the sermon or the Bible Quest lesson or the choir anthem are what matters most on the sabbath, we’re not hearing what Jesus is saying to us in our own time. What matters is meeting human need.

Jesus enters the synagogue, a faithful practice of Jesus on the sabbath. There he encounters a man with a withered hand. You might say the man’s life is withered as well. It’s shrunken, contracted. He’s not much use in a farming community.

You could say that Jesus invites trouble when he invites the man to come forward. What he’s about to do he wants everyone to see. This is about as public as you can get as you prepare to heal on the sabbath. Jesus issues a challenge to the Pharisees: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath? That is, to save life or to kill?”

There is silence from the Pharisees. No one answers. Embarrassing for them, even shaming. And the gospel writer tells us that Jesus is grieved at their hardness of heart. There was no mercy when it came to the sabbath laws,

apparently. He invites the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And when he does, his hand is restored. He is restored – to his community, his farming way of life, the work given to him by generations gone before. This is what Jesus does. He does mercy. He does justice. He restores meaning. He makes joy possible. And they plot to kill him.

What does the story have to offer us? As Christians, who Sunday after Sunday read about hunger in Jesus’ day, we are made aware of hunger in our day too. And we are in a position to show mercy to people who are hungry.

Our news sources focus on hunger at least as often as our Bible stories. Daily we are informed of famine in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Gaza. One journalist I read yesterday describes the way starvation is now used as a weapon of war. Perhaps it always was.

Here at MacNeill we offer many opportunities to reach out to hungry people right in our city. It’s not only homeless men who line up at lunch and dinner programs now but whole families who simply cannot pay their rent and buy wholesome food as well.

We contribute to 541 Barton Street. It’s that lunch counter where those who can afford to pay also pay it forward to help others eat.

We offer support periodically to Hamilton Food Share and Wesley Centre and to the meals hosted by Westdale United Church. And right now our Outreach Board is renewing our commitment for Hess Street School’s breakfast program that was begun years ago when Glenys Magill taught there.

In the reform church we no longer require fasting (although some do fast). We can shop on Sundays or hang out wash or mow the lawn or even skip church. What is important is the invitation by the Risen Christ to honour the Sabbath by showing mercy, by alleviating human suffering, by creating joy. Amen.