

“In Need of Food”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
July 22, 2018
Scripture: Mark 2:23 – 3:6

This week the kids and I were walking through our alley. We walked by a neighbor’s back yard – we don’t know that neighbor as well as we probably should. They have a wonderful raspberry bush with berries on it that looked beautiful, bright red, juicy, ripe, right there for the plucking. And I got to thinking about rules. It’s okay to pick a neighbor’s raspberries if the bush is growing over into your own yard. You can pick and eat the ones that are hanging in your own yard, even if the bush is not yours. You can pick and eat the berries if the neighbor tells you in advance something like, “Feel free to eat the berries – we love growing the bush but don’t know what to do with them.” Or, “We’re going to be going on vacation and if you are willing to water our plants you can eat as many of the ripe berries as you want.” But if you don’t know the neighbor, and have never talked to them about their berries, you can’t just pluck them off the bush and eat them.

Our story this morning is also a story about needing food, and appeals to rules and law and order, and a bitter conflict.

This is probably not a very familiar story in the Bible, even though it comes at the beginning of the first gospel that tried to put words to paper. It’s confusing and a bit complicated. And we will get to that. It might also be less familiar because it wants us to imagine, first, that Jesus and his disciples were in need of food. Not the ones helping others get food, but getting in trouble because they needed food and took it from where they found it. And so the Gospel of Mark invites us to put ourselves into their sandals. To wonder what it is like to be in need of food. For some of us, that is not a stretch. For others, that is a harder thing to do. Some of us want to think of ourselves as helpers, but this story stretches us, invites us to think of ourselves among the disciples needing food.

This summer we are looking at stories of meals in the Bible. The first half – roughly – has been inspirational. Stories of miracles, and giving thanks for the daily bread. Comparisons of the kingdom of heaven to banquets. God providing manna in the wilderness and Jesus teaching that “for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.”

The next several weeks we will turn to stories about rules for eating. Jennifer – back from sabbatical – will step from the organ to the pulpit and reflect about the Genesis rule to tend the garden and how that shapes her decisions around food. Maureen – preaching about a major turning point for the early church when it comes to meals and rules and how the church decides to choose welcome. Phil Romine, a former former seminary intern and then staff member will return to our pulpit to take a look at kosher laws.

There are a lot of rules and regulations about food. Some are for safety reasons. No one wants to get food poisoning. Some of the rules are about etiquette. Like which fork do you use for a salad and whether it is okay to put your elbows on the table. There are rules to be followed about healthy diets and cultural rules that shape our family life.

Our story today begins with a conflict about a rule about the Sabbath, and ends with the enemies of Jesus wanting to destroy him. But in the middle there is a fascinating little story about food, and Jesus, and Jesus' followers, and rules.

On its surface, the story goes like this. One sabbath - one special day - Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields. And on the way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. They were observed doing so, caught, and accused by the Pharisees of doing something unlawful on the sabbath. Jesus appeals to a case of David, before he became King, doing something similar with his companions. And then Jesus uses that story to make a larger point that the sabbath was made for humankind, not the other way around. That the purpose of people is not to follow rules; the rules exist to help people.

Earlier this year we were given a gift and a challenge. Could we do more to springboard from our strength to do more to help people who are hungry? We have been doing research, looking at the nature of hunger near us and learning about good organizations working to address the problem. Learning about food shelves and free meals and innovative programs. One of the things our Food Initiative Intern is helping us learn about are the rules around food. Eligibility requirements for SNAP benefits. Qualifications to receive help at food shelves. Rules about how our industrial kitchen can be used. And the hard to suss out but so important invisible rules about who feels welcome and the ways that food expresses culture.

To be honest, I picked out this story somewhat quickly because it has a good plot and has an intersection between Jesus and food and rules. But then I read the story closely. I've read it before, of course, but on close read, some questions emerged. And some things don't add up. And I am grateful to a Bible scholar William Placher, and his work on this gospel. It is fascinating – and speaks into our contemporary situation.

In the English translation we are using, “Jesus was going through the grainfields and as they made their way, the disciples began to pluck heads of grain.” But it isn't like they just picked some fresh raspberries that were too tempting to pass up. Or they were really, really hungry and looked to grab a low-hanging fig off a tree. Those things might be considered a not very neighborly thing to do, taking someone else's best raspberries or fig. But they would not be in conflict with rules about the Sabbath. We think of them as hungry, eating the grain . . . but the story makes no mention of hunger or eating. “Jesus was going through the grainfields and as they made their way, the disciples began to pluck heads of grain.” A literal translation might be “began to make a way, plucking the ears of grain.” Or began to build a road . . .¹ So that is a bit weird.

Like a king, using eminent domain to build a road. Like St. Paul planners trying to put a light rail line through the existing city, or have special speed limits on Ayd Mill Road. The disciples are making a way through someone else's field of grain.

We might remember how the gospel of Mark begins.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’” (Mark 1:1-3).

And so this is about more than just a tasty raspberry that is too juicy-looking to pass up. It seems that Mark wants us to think of the disciples doing the work of clearing the path, preparing the way for Jesus.

The Pharisees object that the disciples are working on the Sabbath, and it is not clear, what exactly they are doing and what exactly their objection is. But it is not about eating not being allowed. Do they have sickles out, swinging side to side clearing the grain? That would be work. Or was the gospel writer exaggerating with this making a road and a deep allusion to the opening words of the gospel and the Pharisees are being picky. It is not clear.²

Moving to what happens next, when they are caught, and accused of breaking this rule. Jesus responds. He sounds so authoritative here in Mark.

And Jesus said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.”

But if you go back and look at Jesus’ defense, some things aren’t right. Not just some things. In fact, the details are all wrong. And when we try to understand it just adds confusion to confusion. Again, William Placher.

This gets the original story wrong on almost every count. David was by himself, with no companions. The story does not mention hunger. David did not enter the house of God; the priest was Ahimelech rather than Abiathar; and though David took the bread with him, the story does not mention that he ate it.³

Scholars have a bit of trouble with explaining why Jesus gets the details wrong. They gloss over them. Read quickly like I do, quickly putting the story into my own culture and my own rules and thinking to having our family walk by a neighbor’s raspberry bush and telling our kids not to pick the ripe berries. Placher asks,

Is this all a joke? A mistake? By Jesus? By Mark? Mark so rarely misremembers [Scriptural] texts that I doubt he is doing so here. I infer, then, that the point of [Jesus’] reply is to show that these Pharisees, eager to burden the common people with the details of the Law, are actually so ignorant of Scripture that they do not notice on misquotation

after another. Such matters have not altogether changed, and those who quote a particular biblical passage as a means of condemnation often turn out not to know its context or relation to other biblical texts.⁴

To those who have had rules unfairly applied to them. To those who have had rules used as a weapon rather than as a guide for good living.

It shows how Jesus was targeted by rules that he felt were unfairly applied. It shows that people who are enforcing the rules don't always understand the rules or the purpose behind the rules. And at the end of the story we see an alliance developing between people trying to enforce religious rules with political parties, in this case the Herodians, that leads to sheer hypocrisy, the goal of destroying enemies, and putting Jesus and the work of God under threat. The conflict here is not between Jesus and Judaism but between Jesus and those who lose sight of the point of the laws.⁵

The pattern of Jesus' ministry in the early parts of this gospel is clear. He heals, he forgives sins, he challenges legalism, he eats with sinners. One more time a quote from our helpful though deceased biblical scholar William Placher.

These activities are more related than at first they might seem, for handicaps and diseases generally rendered people in ancient Israel "unclean" - at worst forced in every way to the margins of society, at best excluded from full participation in religious activities. In every way, Jesus is breaking down barriers. Jesus does not ask the afflicted outsiders he encounters to repent or to perform cleansing rituals. He simply welcomes them and cures them? Who could object? Well, it turns out many could - then and now.⁶

Earlier this summer we tried to articulate who we are as a church and what we are trying to do. We arrived at three sentences that are both specific to Central and in line with the good news of Jesus.

- We put our faith into action by nurturing spiritual growth and reflecting the call of God to serve our neighbor
- We transform our communities by promoting social justice and engaging others in ministries that drive change
- We invite everyone to the table, sharing fellowship, worship, meals, music and works as one body

That is what we are trying to do here. May we be faithful. May we be brave. May we be generous, and may we be guided by and follow in the ways of Jesus. Amen.

¹ William C. Placher, Mark in the Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible series (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 50.

² Ibid., 50-51.

³ Ibid, 51.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 53-54.