

*Based on Mark 2:23-27. Gleaning Grain on the Sabbath.*

When and how do we eat?

The most basic of ordinary questions for Ordinary Time, for every living creature, human and more-than-human alike. From the cry of a baby for its mother's breast to the roar of a lion for a piece of meat to the plucking of grain from the fields surrounding Capernaum for a few of the earliest disciples of Jesus, the most basic of ordinary questions for every living creature becomes *when and how do we eat?*

For you and I in a land of plenty - yes, even with the rising costs of food, we live in a land of plenty - the question is often an afterthought. We pick up something fast on the way home from work. We order in from DoorDash or GrubHub or UberEats. We pay other people to worry about food for us or, alternatively, we obsess about it because we can't stop eating once we start and we get diabetes and heart disease and high cholesterol and all the rest. For some of us, in this land of plenty, food can in even be experienced as *the enemy*.

Even still, in our land of plenty, there are plenty who hunger, as we know through our ministry with the Community Meal - taking place later today in Charles Town - and the Shepherdstown Shares Food Pantry, and the Community Cup New Worshiping Community and the Coffee Shop in Martinsburg.

In fact, even in our land of plenty, food *insecurity* is of such growing concern that one of our focus points here at SPC for our emerging Matthew 25 Initiative is to discern how to address it, not only with direct service to alleviate hunger in the ministries with which we engage, but also at what we call a *systemic* level. Meaning, what systems and structures are in place that keep people from accessing food in a land of plenty, and how do we go about challenging and then changing those systems and structures in order that all may be fed?

A close reading of our Lesson from Mark's Gospel reveals that Jesus is focused on the same concern. Galilee is, after all, the bread basket of the land, filled with farms and fisheries sufficient to feed the masses.

In Galilee, the most basic of ordinary questions regarding when and how to eat should be easy: when you are hungry, eat the food that is growing all around you. That is what Jesus is doing in this Lesson.

But that is not all.

Then and there, as it is here and now, conditions apply as to who may access the food that is plentiful, and when they may access it. Most of the fields and fisheries in first century Galilee are owned by absentee landlords or even Roman commercial interests, who export the cream of the crop to far-flung places like Jerusalem or Caesarea or Philippi or even Rome itself. Galileans, themselves, are left behind.

The vast majority of the people of the land of plenty in fact scramble for crumbs left behind by the Big Dogs. A practice called *gleaning the fields* keeps the people somewhat fed: the dregs of the harvest are left behind on the branches for the people to pick over. This may very well be what Jesus and his disciples are doing in our

Lesson: *gleaning the fields* of what has been left over from the harvest or will not make it to market before going bad.

These crumbs might actually be sufficient to feed those who hunger if there were not also restrictions imposed by the powers that be, serving to keep poor people poor, while those who are fed gorge on far too much. For them, in our Lesson, those restrictions include the prohibition of gleaning on the Sabbath. For us, those restrictions are mostly around hours of operation: the Community Meal is this time of day, this day of the week. Food Pantry hours are this time of day, these days of the week. Food stamps are this much per month, too bad if your kids are hungry halfway through. Food Lion gives this much food to the pantry and no more, too bad if it runs out before the next shipment.

None of which is to criticize the faithful volunteers who keep Community Meal and the Food Pantry and the Food Stamp program running and the contributions from Food Lion coming! You all are saints! Well done, good and faithful servants!

All of which is to say, however, *what gives!?*

In a land of such promise and plenty, how did we get to such a place?! Again, Jesus is asking the same question. Only he is not content to merely *ask* the question. He begins his ministry here in Mark's Gospel by *acting* in response to the question.

To put what Jesus and his disciples are doing in this Lesson in context, it would be like Rev. Dwight McCormick from The Community Cup gathering his parishioners, many of whom live without permanent shelter and consistent meals, and bringing them to Food Lion on a Sunday afternoon to raid the refrigerator right there in the middle of the store, no questions asked, no finances exchanged. Can you imagine such a thing?!

You and I good law-abiding folks grabbing groceries on the way home from a rousing worship service here at SPC might respond with shock and even anger. We work our tails off to afford these inflationary food prices and they just waltz in here and take what they want?! And a Presbyterian Pastor is leading them to do it!? We might threaten to call the police. We might actually call the police!

To which Jesus, through Pastor Dwight, might respond: but we're hungry. Period.

Indeed, as biblical scholar Ched Myers argues, *the disciples' commandeering grain against Sabbath regulations must ... be seen as a protest of "civil disobedience" over the politics of food* in the land. Let me say that again: *the disciples' commandeering grain against Sabbath regulations must ... be seen as a protest of "civil disobedience" over the politics of food* in the land.

It is not just that the disciples are hungry. It is not just that the prohibition of gleaning on the Sabbath is theologically indefensible, even and perhaps especially from a faithful Jewish perspective. The Sabbath is, in

the end, a commitment to practicing for at least one day a week God's vision of *Shalom*, where all are fed and all is forgiven and all is healed and we live as God intended in the first place. There is no better Sabbath activity - even and especially from within a faithful Jewish perspective - than to feed the hungry in body and soul.

By gleaning on the Sabbath in direct violation of the law, Jesus is insisting that the law itself is corrupt, inasmuch as it keeps poor people poor while filling up the coffers of the already well-fed. This protest of civil disobedience around food politics continues throughout the ministry of Jesus, up to and including the feeding of multitudes, as *bread* becomes a symbol of *all* that is to be shared,.

This is the mission and ministry we remember these millennia later as we gather around grape and grain and the ever-expanding table of Jesus in a meal we call "communion." At this table, you and I glean a square of grain and a thimble full of grape juice and fervently insist the hungry will be fed in both body and soul.

But it is not enough, in my view, to stop there. Like Jesus, we must *act* in a land of promise and plenty, both by naming and challenging - and changing, if we can - the systems and structures that keep hungry people from the food that, but rights, belongs to them.

One way is to join Pastor Dwight at the local Food Lion, raiding the refrigerator on behalf of those who hunger in this land of plenty. (I can all him up right now and we can go there after worship if you're up for it!) If that sounds too daunting, perhaps you might answer the call to coordinate the monthly Community Meal in Charles Town. We still desperately need someone to fill that position by September.

A third way, and the one the Mission Committee will promote throughout the summer, is to do our small part as a congregation to relieve the pending famine unfolding in Gaza. This is no small feat, as most of the humanitarian aid providers in Gaza have been operating out of Rafah, and now even Rafah is unsafe. Even so, we must try.

An anonymous donor has already offered a \$2000 base donation as a challenge to the church to match or exceed. The SPC Session has decided to direct famine relief to World Central Kitchen, which many of you have heard about in the news these past several months. Their most recent report is that they are, indeed, able and willing to distribute food, albeit with great difficulty.

In the Way and Spirit of Jesus, I plead with you, I beg you, to do what you have to do to contribute to this famine relief. Save the money you would spend on DoorDash delivery and give the extra four or five dollars. Eat rice and beans instead of meatloaf and scrape a couple of extra bucks together to contribute to the cause. If it is available to you and your health, go without a meal or two every couple of weeks and donate the savings.

The bottom line is that our tax dollars are bombing the people of Gaza into oblivion. The least we can do to counteract our contribution to this injustice is to try to keep them from starving.

When and how we eat is the most basic of ordinary questions for every living creature, human and more-than-human alike. When we gather at the table of Jesus, when we take the table of Jesus into the world, we insist in both word and in deed the hungry *will* be fed in both body and soul, now and forever.

Friends, the table is ready!