

“Food Fasts”

Mark 2: 13 – 22

Makemie Presbyterian Church

November 4, 2007

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Jesus Calls Levi

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, & he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, & he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax-collectors & sinners were also sitting with Jesus & his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners & tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax-collectors & sinners?”

When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “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.”

The Question about Fasting

Now John’s disciples & the Pharisees were fasting; & people came & said to him, “Why do John’s disciples & the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

Jesus said to them, “The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, & a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, & the wine is lost, & so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

I have always loved to cook and when I was at seminary, among the poor, homesick and hungry, my fellow students told me that it was Mosaic Law to ask if they would like something to eat. One of the things that I liked to prepare in Texas was a mesquite grilled shrimp quesarito with avocado raita and when I would explain this was what I was making, they would respond, “A what-what-what with what?” allowing me the unrivaled pleasure of repeating myself, this time in italics: “*A mesquite grilled shrimp quesarito with avocado raita.*” If you have not offered someone a Mesquite-Grilled Shrimp Quesarito with Avocado Raita in an obnoxiously offhand manner, you are really only half alive.

Now one of my classmates at the time Kirk, has been known to finish a meal without (technically) inhaling, after which we would play this game called What Did Kirk just Eat?

Me; Okay, what did Kirk just eat?

Kirk (after a thoughtful pause): Was it chicken?

Me: No.

Kirk: It had meat in it.

And so on. Every now and again, though, some actual citizen sneaks past the tripwire and they generally want to know what I am feeding them,

though before doing so I want to make a couple of observations regarding my motives in the kitchen realm.

It is certainly true that cooking is therapeutic, creative, & all those other faintly creepy self-helpish words. I would love to tell you that cooking was part of my journey toward actualization. I would love to tell Oprah this. I would love to tell Oprah this with weeping. But I learned to cook for a much simpler reason in the abject hope that people would spend time with me if I put good things in their mouths. It is in other words (like practically everything else I do), a function of my desperation for emotional connection and acclaim.

Most ministers are driven by the same impolite needs, though it is terribly unfashionable to admit this is the case. In any case, the sermon before us this morning is about food. As you can tell from the reading the subject today is food. Those of you who have been pressuring me to quit talking about mercy and justice and forgiveness and grace and deal with something important, you've finally won. I'm going to talk to you about food. The fact is there are very few people who associate the position of their spiritual life or their relationship to the church with food. Very few. The dining room is very seldom regarded as a scene of sin & grace. But the Bible does. Even though Jesus on one occasion according to Mark 7 in a

respond to criticism of his followers said, "Look, its not what goes into a person's stomach but what comes out of a person's heart that really counts."

Even though he said that clearly, the subject of food would not go away; and has not yet gone away. There are two problems with reference to food that come up in text that Ted read. But there are other problems as well. The church has been concerned from the beginning about what you eat. Did you know that? What you eat? Yeah.

In the fifteenth chapter of Acts when the early church was spreading out into Gentile country in larger cities more and more cities of the ancient world a letter was sent to the new churches saying, "Look, you are not bound by any old food regulations. You are not bound by the kosher food laws of the Jewish people but please have a little consideration. In every city there are synagogues; so do not flaunt your freedom by eating things that are abhorrent to the Jewish people. Especially things that have been killed but the blood has not been adequately drained from it. Please."

What you eat is important.

In the city of Corinth a largely non-Jewish city it was the practice there according to the pagan religions when a farmer brought an animal to be slaughtered when the animal was slaughtered and the meat was to be

put on the market, the first thing that was done was to take the meat to the pagan temple, dedicate it to the pagan god or goddess as the case may be, and then take the meat to the market. Some Christians said, “I won’t eat that meat that has been sacrificed and dedicated to a pagan shrine, I will not eat it.” So at their fellowship meals all kinds of problems:

“There’s the meat.”

“Where’d you get the meat?”

“Was it sacrificed...?”

“I’m not going to eat it. You going to eat it? I’m not going to eat it.”

Pretty soon churches were splitting over the meat. Paul wrote to them and said, “There’s nothing wrong with the meat, but if picking over your food is going to divide the church I suggest nobody eat any meat.”

He was upset that the church menu was splitting the church.

When Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, there were at least five congregations meeting in homes, they didn’t have buildings then. And one of the congregations that he addressed in his letter, the Roman letter, was a congregation made up of vegetarians. They did not believe that you should eat any meat. Some people therefore were having a problem when they all got together for their fellowship meal. “Do we? Do we not.”

And the people who ate the meat began to feel superior. Those who ate only vegetables said, "I'm a vegetarian." And so it went. And Paul said, "Please. The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking. But justice and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. But what you eat. No."

The church, this will bother you, the church has also been concerned about how much you eat. I pause to let you reflect on that. I don't know if you realize it but in the corridors of time in the early centuries of the church in order for people to understand what is serious, and what is more serious and what is most serious sin, selected seven, we call them deadly, seven cardinal sins; that is the source of all other sins. Horrible ugly serpentine crawling up from perdition itself; and one of the seven, gluttony. Excessive eating. One of the seven deadliest of all the sins.

You see the early church as it spread out into the Greek -- Roman world encountered that phenomenon, known as the Festival of Gorging. Where people who could afford it brought in all kinds of food and they ate for days and days and days. Drank wine and ate, drank wine and ate, for days and days and days. The way they did it, you might want to put your fingers in your ears, cause this isn't very delicate, they provided a feather for each person to help induce vomiting so you could keep eating. And the

church encounter these places these magnificent big homes that put on these big feasts and the church said, "That's wrong.

"Because it violates one of the fundamental convictions of all Christian people, all Jewish people, and that is you share your bread with the hungry, you share your food with the needy. And that is nothing but obscene sin."

How much you eat has always concerned the church.

But the two concerns in the text Ted read this morning have to do with when you eat and with whom you eat. When do you eat? Jesus and his disciples were along the sea and it was a fast day, as a race the Jewish people were required to fast only on the Day of Atonement but in the course of the practice of piety some of them began to practice fasting one day a week, and then two days a week. Some fasted Tuesday, Thursday, some fasted on Wednesday Friday. I don't know what day it was but it was a fast day, and Jesus disciples had lunch. (knock)

"Why are your disciples eating when this is a fast day?"

And Jesus said, "You don't fast at a party. This is a kingdom party. We're celebrating the love and the grace of God, and the coming of... Oh, there will be a time, there will be a time when it will be appropriate to fast when the bridegroom is taken away then everybody is sad. When the bride

leaves everybody is sad, then it's a time for fasting. But not while the party is going on. Don't show up for the party and fast. Cause everybody knows all you are doing is displaying your religion."

Can you imagine a person going to a party and

"Would you like some hor d'ouvres?"

"No, I am fasting."

"Would you like something?"

"No I'm fasting."

"Would you try some of these, Mrs. Brown made these."

"No I'm fasting."

Why did you go to the party? I'll tell you why you went to the party, to display your religion. That's one of the most disgusting things anybody can do is to flaunt a little conviction; like I'm fasting. Oh, there is a time. There is a time for fasting. For the last few years, the Presbyterian women have a Fat Tuesday party, a Mardi Gras party & as part of this party order pancakes from the Episcopal church Shrove Tuesday pancake supper. It works well for both churches. We are fed and the Episcopal church sells more dinners for their fundraiser. It is the Tuesday before the beginning of lent, before Ash Wednesday, and it is the feasting before the fast. But on Wednesday the fast. Do you fast on Ash Wednesday? Now there is no rule,

no rule. But reflect on what it means that Christ suffered and die for you. And if, if, If, you have a capacity for a conviction so profound and so deep as that you may not eat as many cheeseburgers.

In other words Jesus said, “Don’t try and imitate somebody else, or try and do what somebody else did. You don’t put new wine in old skins it’ll burst them and then you lose the wine and the skins. You don’t put a piece of new cloth on an old garment after its washed it’ll tear a bigger hole. You don’t try and put something on something, let it come genuinely from you.

“I’m fasting but I’m not displaying it because this is how I stand, hungry before God today.”

But the big issue, the big issue that kept coming up and coming up over and over again was; who gets to sit at the table? With whom do you eat? This came up so many times. Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son. The boy came home and the father had a big meal and the older brother came in from the field, found out his brother was home & he wouldn’t go in and eat. His father came out and said, “Son we’re ready to eat.”

And he said, “I’m not coming in. I will not sit at table with him. You know and I know what he did, and I resent your forgiving him. I resent the party. I won’t. “

It's a big problem. With whom do you eat? Look at Jesus eating with publicans and sinners. It came up all the time.

Simon Peter went to Caesarea up on the coast and preached to some people who were not Jewish. He belong to the Jerusalem church which was all Jewish. When he got back the elders called him in.

"Simon Peter we'd like to have a special meeting before service."

"Uh, okay. What's the problem?"

"We understand that you went into the house of someone who was a gentile and you ate with them."

And he said, "that's true. I did."

They called him on the carpet of the church.

It happened a great deal in the church. At the church in Antioch in Syria they were having a fellowship meal and they had Jewish people there and they had Gentile people there, Jewish Christians there, Gentile Christians there. Paul was there missionary to the Gentiles, Peter was there missionary to the Jews. And they were getting along fine, everybody was eating together and then some folk came in from Jerusalem and whispered in Simon Peter's ear & he moved over & Barnabus and some others and they formed a separate table and Paul got up and he was angry. And he went over to Simon Peter and he said, "Do you realize what

you've done? If you have to have separate tables it's not church anymore."

The church was chilled.

Over food? No not over the food but who gets to eat it.

With whom will you sit?

You see the issue is not a simple one, you don't just say, "Hooray Jesus, go after all those people."

The fact of the matter is, extending hospitality, welcoming, receiving sinners and tax collectors gives the impression, gives the impression of condoning it. If you're seen with certain people in public, hah, hah, hah, hah, guilt by association, guilt by association, birds of a feather flock together, Jesus was eating with... "See I told you he was that way."

" Yeah. I knew it the minute I laid eyes on him"

You hear that kind of yack, you see. Its not a simple matter. The fact of the matter is to this day, the question comes up all the time, "with whom will you eat?"

There is hardly a week goes by that I do not receive from somebody on the shore or through the mail, the question, "that Makemie church. I don't know about that church. Whom do you allow at the Lord's table? Who is invited to the Lord's table?"

And then I remember Jesus, the people he ate with; sinners, saints, religious, not religious, tax collectors, what a collection of people, and he ate with them. And that's all I can say to people. In fact I remember the last night of Jesus' life on earth, the last time he was with a group they ate together. He said, "I've been wanting to eat with you one last time." And they were at the table. Do you know who was at the table? Its easy to say "the 12 apostles."

Thomas was there. Pretty soon Thomas would say, "I don't believe in the resurrection." He's there.

Simon Peter was there who would in hours say to people in the courtyard where Jesus had be on trial, with cursing and oath, he said, "I never met Jesus in my life!" He's there. He's at the table.

You know who else is there? James & John are at the table. James & John, the sons of thunder. Do you remember them? They came to Jesus one day and said, "Jesus when you come into your kingdom we want to be on the executive committee." In fact Matthew says, they got their mother to call and see if Jesus would let her two boys sit at the head table. They're there.

Judas is there. For thirty coins he took the enemy to where Jesus spent the night in prayer so they could arrest him. For thirty pieces of silver. He's at the table.

Now tell me who is excluded?

Who are we to say, no, no, no. no.

This is the Lord's table and the rule is this, only those people are excluded that Jesus excluded. Everybody else is welcome. Amen.