

Potlucks R Us
Mark 2:18-22
August 5, 2018
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

I like words a lot...I can wordsmith a document for hours. Dianne, the church's administrative assistant, is the same way. She spends a lot of time on the newsletter, bulletins, and other church communication, making sure we have said what we meant to say. I am very aware that we are lucky to have Dianne, especially, this week, when I read these examples of announcements in some other church bulletins.

*For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

*Tuesday at 4:00 p.m. there will be an ice cream social. All ladies giving milk will please come early.

*Barbara remains in the hospital. She is having trouble sleeping and requests tapes of the pastor's sermons.

*The minister unveiled the church's new tithing campaign slogan last Sunday "I Upped My Pledge - Up Yours."

*Thursday night – potluck supper. Prayer and medication to follow.

Let's face it, sometimes prayer and medication following a potluck isn't a bad idea. But churches love their potlucks.

*It was at a church potluck that I was first introduced to the colorful concoction we call "orange fluff." I don't know what's in it. It's delicious.

*About now, you are probably asking yourselves, what do potlucks have to do with our current sermon series, *Spirituality for Busy People*? Well, we've spent the last few weeks talking about and even trying out practices that are meant to help us draw near to God. We are continuing this exploration today as we focus on food---specifically the spiritual practices of fasting and feasting. Recall, the reason we

embarked on this journey together was the realization I had while on vacation that the busy, high anxiety time in which we are living is taking its toll on many of us. I was invited to a meeting this week where I was again reminded that we are no good to other people if we don't take care of ourselves. We cannot hope to be the world changers we are called to be if we are not connected to God and to the divine spark within ourselves. You are important---don't ignore your own well-being.

*Today's text is from the Gospel of Mark and is the story of Jesus' response to a comparison drawn between the Pharisees, the followers of John the Baptist, and the followers of Jesus. Mark 2:18-22:

⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people^[a] came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

²¹ "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. ²² 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."^[b]

The scene before this one in the Gospel of Mark is the scene where Jesus directed Levi, a tax collector, to stop what he was doing and follow him. At Levi's house, where there were other tax collectors and sinners, Jesus sat at the table and ate with them. The horror! Jesus' disciples were asked why he would eat with people like that.

Overhearing their questions, Jesus answered, "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." In other words, "You aren't the boss of me.

There is room at the table for all people, especially the ones who have usually been excluded.” This is a very loose translation of course.

Continuing with the common thread of food, in today’s text, Jesus wasn’t asked about *who* he was eating with, but instead was asked why his followers weren’t fasting like the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist. Before we talk about Jesus’ answer, a word about fasting itself. For Jews, there are only two days of major fasting mandated, Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Tisha b’Av (Teesh ah Bee Av-Day of Mourning). Other minor fasts were observed, but they are not required. Minor fasts could be called at special times of devotion, mourning, or penance, but again, with the exception of the two major fasts, fasting was not compulsory in the Jewish tradition.

Both John the Baptist’s followers and the Pharisees, however, went way beyond the letter of the law and had adopted fasting as a way of preparing for the coming of God’s kingdom, which for them would be one major event that everybody needed to be ready for. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Jesus, on the other hand, understood the coming of God’s kingdom as something that would come about gradually and, in fact, was already working its way into the world through his followers and the community of people that had sprung up around them.

Jesus, asked to defend his followers’ lack of fasting, made two points, both of which make sense in light of his understanding of the coming of the kingdom of God. First, he explained there is a time for fasting and a time for feasting, “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.” In his answer, the climatic “happily ever after” of history is pictured as a wedding, which, in that time and place, was not a 30-minute ceremony, with a reception in the evening, but instead, went on for days. It was a big celebration that

required a whole lot of preparation. Through this metaphor, Jesus' point was that the time of preparation was over and since the dawning of the kingdom had begun, celebration was in order and the opportunity to celebrate should not be squandered. Never miss an opportunity to celebrate.

That passage continues, though, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day." In Mark's own time, which looked back on the time of Jesus by almost a full generation, the church (Mark's audience) did participate in times of fasting. This part of what Mark's Jesus says reminds us that there is a rhythm to this journey...sometimes we fast and sometimes we feast. The feasting is just as important as the fasting.

The second point Jesus made in his answer is that change is good and necessary.

* Like the authors of Matthew and Luke, the author of Mark uses a saying about new wine in old wine skins to make a point. In Mark, Jesus' point is that there is tension in mixing the old and the new. The metaphors of new cloth on an old garment and new wine in old wineskins remind us that new situations call us to new ways of being in the world, but I think there is a little more to it than this metaphor indicates. And Columbia Theological Seminary's, Dr. Jeffrey Tribble agrees with me. He wrote about the metaphor of new wine in old wineskins and said, "In one sense, the metaphor of wineskins is incomplete. An old wineskin does lose its elasticity, whereas human beings have the potential to change. Historic practices can become fresh and powerful when they are enlivened by a sense of God's leading." He goes on to talk specifically about the church, "The newness that the coming Jesus brings cannot be confined in old forms. The reign of God calls us to develop habits and new forms of ministry that are fresh and give life while managing the messiness of conflict and change." (*Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B*, p. 113) If we choose to fast or feast, we can and

should change the way we do them in order to make them meaningful for our time and place.

*So, this brings us to the question, how might we choose to incorporate eating or not eating into this part of our journey and our own spiritual practices? In her book, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, Lauren Winner, writes about fasting as a Jewish spiritual practice, “Fasting,” she says, “is meant to take you, temporarily, out of the realm of the physical and focus your attention heavenward; as one Jewish guide to fasting puts it, ‘at the heart of this practice is a desire to shift our attention away from our immediate needs and to focus on more spiritual concerns.’” Winner goes on to explain that her own experiences of fasting have included feeling obsessed with her stomach’s feeling of emptiness and various ways of “beating the system,” including sneaking into a campus kosher deli for food in the middle of the night.

We’ve already talked about the fact that the early church used fasting. Over the years, most mainline Christians have given up the practice, except maybe during Lent when social media is flooded with all the things we are giving up or taking on for Lent. If the posts on social media are any indication of how well we do at focusing on God rather than our bellies, I wouldn’t give us high marks. A friend of mine, having given up chocolate for Lent, posted a picture of a chocolate Easter bunny she saw in the store; her post read more like chocolate bunny porn than a moment of devotion to God.

Fasting is not meant to make us miserable, but to encourage us to be still. It is not meant to distract us from reality, but to silence us so that we can hear the things that get lost in the crunching of our chips and slurping of our shakes. Each of us, should we choose to give fasting a try, can choose how his/her fasting will work. Will you fast from everything except water? Will you plan to have your morning coffee? Will you fast from processed foods or restaurant food? Will your fast be

about solidarity with our neighbors who are hungry or will you focus your time with God on the children separated from the parents who are still waiting to be reunited with their parents? Or simply on your own need to be still? The choices are all yours.

Of course, beyond fasting, is feasting, or just plain old everyday using food to fuel our bodies. All you have to do is take a stroll through Leviticus to know the Jewish tradition has a whole lot to say about food. Clearly, God cares about what we eat. Practicing the Jewish dietary laws, “keeping Kosher,” cultivates a profound attentiveness to food. For Jewish people, it transforms eating from an act which necessarily fuels our bodies into an act of faithfulness. I don’t think we need to eat kosher for eating to be a spiritual experience or practice.

What if we made a point to pay attention to where our food comes from? Buying seasonally and locally affirms the God-given network of social and ecological relationships in which we participate. Further, I don’t know what your experience has been, but I tend to be more grateful for the food I am eating if I have taken it from the farmer or preparer’s hands. I am much more grateful for the salsa from Steve or cake from Marit than I am for the store-bought versions of those things. In this, and many other ways, food has a way of connecting us.

*And now we come full circle...those potlucks...they connect us. They encourage us to hang around after church and get to know each other. They grow, in us, a spirit of gratitude for the food and for each other. Potlucks remind us that while we are hungry and ready to eat after worship, we are also hungry for connection with each other and with the One who brought us together. They remind us that the gift of community is worth celebrating.

As part of this sermon series, we have been gathering on Wednesday evenings to try out new ways of connecting with God. This week, I

invite you to extend your “practice” beyond Wednesday night and into the whole day.

*Wednesday is Fast Day...you get to define what fasting might be. I know some of us take medication that requires a little something in your stomach. And for some of us, fasting just won't work. So, you define what fasting is for you. Maybe fast from coffee or soda or sugar...you make the rules. At 7 in the evening, we will gather here, so bring your dinner to the church to break the fast and we will talk about what the day was like, whether fasting was helpful, and whether we found ourselves feeling nearer to God. Also, throughout the day on Wednesday, we will have lemon water and cucumber water here at the church, so come on by and hang out with me for a little while.

In the meantime, may you discover and practice meaningful ways to connect with the Holy and with other people each day. Amen.