

Food Fights
September 3rd, 2006
Central Presbyterian Church

Camille L. Cook
James 2:1-8
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Have you ever been in charge of the seating arrangements for a major social function? A wedding, a birthday party, thanksgiving dinner? You are given the responsibility of making sure everyone will be comfortable, happy, and surrounded by complementary conversation partners. It goes something like this...Grandpa has to be close to Grandma because he always forgets his hearing aides and she needs to translate. Uncle Fred has to be kept far from Aunt Joan...you remember what happened last Christmas. Mom gets a corner seat because she won't sit down anyway. Cousin Steve and Cousin John have to be together because they never get to see each other but Cousin Peter can't be next to Steve because Peter and Steve always drink too much.

These are how the arrangements inevitably go...we pay attention to these details trying to ensure that maybe this one time things might go as planned. But they never go as planned. Someone is always forgetting their manners, someone is interrupting the evening's table talk, and then someone breaks a glass and it's all over. Meal time can be a time of laughter and great joy but it can also be a time of great tension and disappointment. Remember the beautifully prepared candle light dinner only to be eaten in silence. Or the much anticipated family reunion deflated by tardy guests and cold food. Or the friendly conversation halted when the infamous hot button topic ruins yet another dinner party. We all have stories like this to tell about our own family food fights.

Food is central to our lives. It shapes our daily routines, our social calendars, our business meetings, and our relationships. As one commentator noted, "Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships. Food sharing creates solidarity...food is life.¹" Food is life, but at the dinner table food can also be the death of us.

¹ Neufeld, Dietmar. *Jesus' Eating Transgressions and Social Impropriety in the Gospel of Mark: A Social Scientific Approach*. Biblical Theology Bulletin, Spring, 2002.

You might be comforted to know that food fights are not a recent innovation. Food fights are actually biblical. Jesus fought more at mealtime than any other time. Food was as central then as it is now. In Jesus' day Jewish food customs dominated the social order and structures. In Judean society there were regulations as to what you could eat, how it could be prepared, where you could eat it, when you could eat it, with whom you could eat it, what to do before you ate it, even how much you could eat. We think we have it bad trying to decide who will sit where or what which wine pairs with which entrée but these are background details in comparison.

But it was more than particular family traditions that dictated meal time regiments in Jesus' day; their traditions were core to their very religious identity. Missteps in preparation or consumption risked a person's status in their family and their participation in the temple community. It made the difference between honor and shame, clean and unclean, holy and unholy. It was no small matter of etiquette it was a matter of inclusion.

Jesus was raised within these Jewish traditions and knew the table rules, he knew how to mind his P's and Q's but throughout the gospels we find him at odds with the common practices of the day. We see Jesus and his disciples criticized for eating with sinners and tax collectors. They are called on the carpet about their lack of fasting. They are confronted for plucking grain on the Sabbath. And then we come to today's text, an exceptionally bitter controversy over Jesus and his disciples eating with unclean hands.

The Pharisees and scribes are continually threatened by Jesus' growing reputation and increasing popularity, they want to put him in his place by shining a little light on his irreputable table mates, his missing manners, and his uncleanly and impure choices in life.

The core value of first century Judaism was purity. In a social scientific study on Mark's gospel it was noted that "Purity practices and distinctions embody the values of groups and ultimately define a way of life, draw lines that mark out boundaries, and mark off relationships with outsiders. These boundaries determine who is in and out, pure and impure, and loyal and disloyal to the group ethos. Failure to follow the so-called traditions of the elders would have raised serious questions about how faithful Jesus and his disciples were to the God of Israel."²

A person's life was spent making themselves pure and holy in the eyes of God. Purity was deeply ingrained in Jewish culture, much if it stemming from the

² Neufeld, Dietmar. *Jesus' Eating Transgressions and Social Impropriety in the Gospel of Mark: A Social Scientific Approach*. Biblical Theology Bulletin, Spring, 2002.

purity codes in Leviticus. And central to that is the passage from Leviticus 20:26, which says 'Be Holy as I am Holy'. God was holy and those who wanted to approach God must also be holy, and that holiness came from their purity. But purity was not an easy status to maintain and impurity was easier to catch a common cold. Blood, illness, eating the wrong kind of food, touching the wrong kinds of things, sitting with the wrong types of people all automatically made someone impure.

So if we look at the gospel's we see that Jesus repeatedly compromised his purity status, and the Pharisee's and scribes brought about verbal challenges to shed light on his true colors. They wanted to make sure everyone was realized what this guy was really about. But throw a little food and Jesus might just throw some back. Each time Jesus meets their challenges using trump cards that silence their petty criticisms. Jesus raises the bar to issues of morality instead of issues of rules and regulations. To Jesus purity and holiness were not as easy as garbage in, garbage out. What you ate, how you ate, with whom you ate didn't change your status in the eyes of Jesus. Jesus refutes the Pharisee's and the scribes with these provocative words. "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." You are what you eat, just didn't cut it.

In another verbal challenge Jesus is asked, which is the greatest commandment? And Jesus responds 'to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And to love your neighbor as yourself.'³ "Love your neighbor as yourself", another central passage from Leviticus (19:18) and it is quoted throughout the gospels and the epistles as the law that mandates morality over rigidity. Jesus' response has been called the royal law or the summary of the law, and this was the law that Jesus preached. He and his disciples did not fulfill the law in the traditional sense. Yes they ignored the washing rituals that governed meal time, yes they disregarded fasting policies, yes they plucked grain on the Sabbath, and yes they even lounged with the sinners and tax collectors. Yes yes yes yes! Guilty as charged. But were they not fulfilling the royal law while breaking the ritual laws?

Colin Morris once wrote: "Your theology, fancy or plain, is what you are when the talking stops and the action starts." Jesus' theology can be seen here at the table.

Jesus knew that he was at odds with the culture and with the religious regulations, but that was exactly the point. His actions spoke as loudly if not louder than his words. John Dominic Crossan a leading scholar on Christology said that, "In the face of such conventions, Jesus made a point of indiscriminately

³ Mark 12:29-31.

eating with anyone, including those who were regarded as outcasts...He openly flaunted propriety by ignoring the boundaries between slave and free, male and female, pure and impure, patron and client, rich and poor.”⁴ With this type of theology you couldn’t just cast someone outside of the umbrella of God’s graces because of the state of their hands, the company of their table, or the food on their plate.

This is what makes the gospels so radical, so unusual, and so compelling. The gospel of Jesus Christ is radically inclusive, dangerously gracious, and prolifically compassionate. And his table fellowship represented his social vision. Marcus Borg said that “The inclusive vision incarnated in Jesus’ table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself. It was an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some people of stature who found his vision attractive.”⁵

Jesus was a boundary breaking visionary for a new way of living and relating to one another. The laws were only helpful to in him in such that they enabled him to practice his religion. If they prohibited him from enacting his religion, his theology, he ignored them. And it is these antics, this ethic that eventually lead to his death. It was too radical, too unsettling for the powers to be. But it is the very radicalness of his message and of his life that compels followers nearly two thousand years after his death.

But I don’t think any of us get into this religion because we love rules and want more restrictions on our lives. We don’t join a church because we like feeling constricted and constrained. Henri Nouwen in his book *Reaching Out*⁶ says, “The Church is not an institution forcing us to follow its rules. It is a community of people inviting us to still our hunger and thirst at its table. Doctrines are not alien formulations which we must adhere to but the documentation of the most profound human experiences which, transcending time and place, are handed

⁴ Powell, Mark Allen. *Jesus as a Figure in History – How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1998. Pg. 90.

⁵ Powell, Mark Allen. *Jesus as a Figure in History – How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1998. Pg. 56.

⁶ Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Reaching Out*. Doubleday Publishing: New York, NY. 1966.

over from generation to generation as a light in our darkness.” The law and the gospel are not compelling to us because they are filled with conventional rules and systematic prohibitions. They are compelling to us because they go against our instincts; they are counter-cultural, unconventional, radical, unsettling, and difficult.

We have all been inspired by the stories of Christian saints and martyrs who have broken laws to fulfill the royal law. In 1940 Nazi authorities issued mandates that the sick and mentally ill should be put to death so that they would no longer be a burden on the Reich. Three state officials came to the Bethel Institute with the instructions they were to be gassed. The doctor in charge of the Institute calmly responded to them: “You can put me into a concentration camp, if you want. That is your affair. But so long as I am free you do not touch one of my patients. I cannot change to fit the times or the wishes of the Fuehrer. I stand under orders from our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We stand under orders and the example of our radically unconventional Lord Jesus Christ. Love your neighbor as yourself. It’s harder than it sounds and that is what makes it so compelling. And so the question in the end is not did you break any rules but did you break boundaries, did you love radically, did you live fully, did you give foolishly, did you follow faithfully? Because in these you fulfill both the law and the gospel.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!