

What's More Holy Than Feeding People?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Luke 6:1-16

It was summer, 2018, and PF (our church's senior high youth group) was on a mission trip to Vicksburg, Mississippi. I remember being with one of our work crews at Vicksburg Family Development. VFD is a social services non-profit that helps struggling low income families meet their most basic of needs. It was an inspiring place to be. We had grown very close to the office manager and director, as we worked all week to mitigate damage they had suffered from a recent flood.

One of the ways the folks at VFD showed their appreciation was to feed us lunch every day, which we gratefully accepted. Later in the week (I think it was Thursday), they presented us with chicken sandwiches from a popular national fast-food chain. Our friends were excited to share with us, especially when some of the youth remarked they'd never tried food from that restaurant before.

But, here was my conundrum... I made a decision years ago, when I found out about this company's philanthropic giving patterns, to never purchase food from them. I am an ally, friend, neighbor and relative to many LGBT people who have been hurt and discriminated against, and I can't stomach the thought that proceeds from something I bought could cause them harm.

Technically... the food wasn't purchased by me. Our hosts, who (to my knowledge) did not discriminate against LGBT people, were showing us the best of Southern hospitality by offering us a meal they considered to be a delicious treat. My mother taught me growing up, to be a gracious guest means eating the food you are offered.

So, what do you think I did? Did I refuse the sandwich, and self-righteously tell our hosts why I was boycotting that particular establishment? Or did I say thanks, and eat the sandwich?

I'm going to leave this as a cliffhanger, and invite you to tune in to our zoom coffee hour and I'll tell you the rest of the story!

Jesus is fond of answering questions with questions.

Some of the Pharisees take issue with his disciples as they pluck and eat handfuls of grain walking through the field on their communal day of rest. "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" they ask.

Jesus answers them with a question: "Have you not heard what David did when he and his companions were hungry?" He went into the tabernacle and ate the special bread that is set apart there for the priests. As if to say - desperate times call for desperate measures. My guys were really hungry; God's laws weren't designed to prevent them from getting something to eat.

The question that is on my mind this morning is... what's more holy, more sacred than feeding people?

The story continues when Jesus enters the synagogue to teach, on another Sabbath, and sees a man with a withered right hand. Knowing he was being watched closely, knowing full well that some in the crowd were trying to find a way to trap him, Jesus calls the man to him and poses a question to his audience: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or destroy it?"

This is a strange time for us to think about Sabbath. On the one hand, it feels like we've been on an imposed Sabbath for about a year now—having events cancelled, isolating, not traveling, schools adapting, shopping less... On the other hand, it feels like EVERYTHING is so much work and there's no rest in sight, and no break from technology, and we're all losing track of what day it is!

The sabbath was a commandment given by God as an act of compassion, not judgment. And Jesus' point in calling himself "Son of Man" was to demonstrate that the point of all laws, even the religious ones, is to uplift and liberate human beings.

You can see this when you look at the context in which the law was originally given – when the Jewish people were first freed from slavery in Egypt, God wanted to demonstrate that human life was sacred, so no one should be treated as property or a commodity.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God commanded that no more will people be able to be worked constantly until their deaths. No, every person shall be given a day off, one day in seven. God commanded other regular days off

we call holidays (Holy Days), for people to focus on family time and time with God, peppered throughout the year. God even commanded for one year in seven to be a sabbath year, where the land and the people rested.

These various laws were meant to make the point that no-one was kept under the boot of anyone else, no one kept oppressed, all able to be free. And yet, some in Jesus' day were interpreting these laws in oppressive ways – where getting food to feed the needy and hungry was wrong one day in seven; and where caring for the sick, healing disease, was not allowed. Only holy things had to be done on the sabbath.

Jesus disrupts this notion, saying that the time is always right to do what's good, to bring forth those things that make life flourish. What is really sacred for Jesus is not a set of laws, or days, or rituals, but people – ordinary, everyday people.

Some of you may have heard the old proverb about asking ourselves a few questions each time we open our mouths to speak: "Is what I am about to say true? Is it necessary? Is it helpful? Is it kind?" I picture Jesus having a similar filter for his actions. One in which "Is it lawful?" isn't a bad start, but additional questions like "Is it compassionate? Is it merciful? Is it kind?" are even better.

In this story, in particular, I see him attempting to state his commitment to the tradition while advocating for and embodying change. As we seek to be a faithful church, in the midst of great upheaval, we too may have a sense that our faith practices are set in stone. And maybe this time has taught us that even our most special traditions are subject to revision.

In early 2021, we know that change is not always optional; it has come uninvited to each household and faith community. We're not alone, there are many sectors of society that have felt disruption. An initial response to this upheaval was simply figuring out how to survive. The next year ahead will see even more change as we discern what changes brought by the pandemic are permanent, what rhythms have been altered forever.

The clamor to return to some sort of normal is understandable, as the number of those affected goes down and the number vaccinated rises. The resumption of certain traditions will certainly be healthy. But if the process is rushed, or if the goal is simply to go back to how it used to be, then the opportunity of the moment to serve God's purpose may be lost. This text

names the needs of others—to do good and to preserve life—as the criteria for choosing to act differently than before.

No matter what else we take away today, I imagine we would do well to hear in and under Jesus' questions to the pharisees, an invitation to always err on the side of grace. To err on the side of kindness and mercy. To err on the side of helping where we can.

The Lord of the Sabbath, feeder of hungry disciples on the Sabbath, healer of withered hands on the Sabbath, would want us to do no less. Amen.