
Food: Choose Life
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 10:17-31

Before we begin, I'd like to share something with you. [hand out papers to volunteers with a single black dot (about 0.5 inch diameter) on one side.] And I'd like you to reflect on what this is and how it relates to your life. [wait].

[slide: black dot]

Now, I'm not sure if anyone is willing to share their reflection, so I won't ask. But I've done this before, and people often tell me that the black dot reminds them of some negative thing in their lives. Which I find a bit odd actually, because I didn't tell you what I was handing out. I gave you a piece of paper with a black dot on one side. But you were allowed to take it from there. You can focus on the black dot. Or you can focus on the other 98% of the page which is white, or you can turn the page over and have a completely blank page. Or you can enjoy the paper itself, and make an airplane or something. Nobody asked you to focus on the black dot, and yet you probably instinctively did. Does that sound like human nature to you? Can you even imagine that there are people on this planet who focus on negative things almost to the exclusion of positive things? I know. Unbelievable, right?

[slide: globe]

And yet, our gospel gives us a glimpse into that too. I guess these negative people were present 2000 years ago too - maybe it's a club I've never heard of. Anyway, in our story, a rich person asks Jesus what he has to do to win the kingdom, and Jesus reminds him of the rules. But notice how the rules Jesus names are all negative. Don't kill. Don't steal. You know the drill. Even the command to honour your parents was a negative command, because what it really meant - and what it still means today - is "don't embarrass your parents".

In any case, the rich man claims that he has followed all the rules. And Jesus says - I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that you only have to do one more thing. The bad news is, it's a positive command. Not doing bad things is

not enough. Jesus tells the man to actually do something positive with his life. It's easy to do, but the man would have to give up the idea that he is "special". Jesus's challenge to the man to give up his wealth was - I believe - not really about money, as much as it was about identity, power, and control. Jesus invited the man to give up thinking he was a big shot. Jesus invited the man to become a nobody - but a nobody who followed Jesus.

Now I can imagine some of you grumbling about what I just said. Of course - you think - the passage is about money. Jesus goes on to say how it is hard for rich people to enter the kingdom after all. What else could Jesus be talking about? To me, the most exciting drama in this story is when 2 amazing things happen that our ears perhaps didn't even hear. First of all, when Jesus challenges the man, the man turns and walks away. I assume we all heard that one. But did you hear this one? After the man turns away, Jesus just lets him go. I mean, really, if it was just about money, why didn't Jesus say, "OK, I can see you're not ready to give up 100% of your money. How about you start with 50% and see how that goes?" And as the man continued to move away: "How about 20%? 10%? If Jesus had mainly cared about the money itself, I think Jesus would have negotiated with the man, but he does not.

There's another reason why I don't think the story is about money. Jesus told the man to sell all that he had and to give his money to the poor, and then to join the Jesus club. That has always intrigued me. In the church, if a rich person wanted to join the church, we would never say that. We would probably hope that they would donate a lot of money to us for us to distribute to the poor. But if the rich man had joined the Jesus club as a rich person, and then given his money to the group, the man would forever have been known as "that guy who gave us all that money." He would have kept his status. Instead, the rich man was invited to follow Jesus, but to follow Jesus as a person with no status.

And one more reason why I think the text is not about money ... when the disciples remind Jesus that they have given everything up to follow him, Jesus says, no worries, in the end you will receive a hundredfold ... a hundred times more than what they had lost. Obviously, possessions and riches are not a problem in themselves. I can't claim to understand the offer to receive 100 mothers, but perhaps that's a subject for a

different sermon.

I think what Jesus is driving it is perhaps something that makes us even more uncomfortable than talking about money in church. For the rich man, possessions were not really his problem. His attachment to his possessions was his problem. Faced with the decision of hanging on to his possessions or turning towards Jesus, the man chose to turn towards his attachments and his status. Each of us have our own attachments of course. Attachments that invite us turn away from Jesus and a life of freedom ourselves. The things to which we are attached are not usually problems in themselves, but if they cause us to turn away from freedom and new life, then they become problems for us. Even in the church, we can fall into attachments that limit new life. Attachments to a building, or a process, or a plan, or a minister. The objects in question are almost never the problem. But attachments to those objects can limit our ability to turn towards Jesus and to move into new life.

The gospel story is a very sad story actually, because Jesus offered the man life, and the man wasn't interested in making the required lifestyle changes. My favourite line is "Jesus, looking at the man, loved him and said ...". Jesus practices "tough love" on the man. And something else you many not have heard in the text - because the text is silent here - after the man slowly walks away, it says "Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'" But if you listen carefully, Jesus sighs right at that moment. Jesus wants to love the man into life, but the man choses status quo and death.

By now you might be starting to wonder what on earth all this has to do with food and World Food Sunday. Maybe by now you are hoping I'll just wrap this up so we can go share "The Tastes of Martin Grove". Nope. Here is it. Jesus wants to love the man into life, but the man choses status quo and death. And the choice between status quo and death over life is something we all struggle with every day, and that struggle is perhaps no more apparent anywhere than in how our global food systems work. Sadly, in our society, our food systems in many ways represents death, even though God clearly intended food to be a source of life.

As the global population increases, we are seeing an increasing separation

between people who have too little, and people who have too much. We now have about 1 billion people who are undernourished at a time when we have about 1 billion people who are obese.

[slide: malnourished vs obese]

Consider these 2 people. For both of them, food is connected with death. The person on the left is dying from lack of food, while the person on the right is dying from not only too much food, but also, the wrong types of food. How can it be that food - the gift from God that surely must represent life, can become an object of death.

We don't usually see such extremes in Canada of course. Here, we have a related but different problem with food. Here's one way to explain it.

[slide: burger vs salad]

The problem in Canada is not so much lack of food, but access to healthy, nutritious food that people can afford. One study found that 1 in 6 households in Canada do not have continuous access to healthy foods. Healthy foods cost more - or so it seems on the surface. But healthy foods also cost less, because healthy foods maintain people's physical, mental, and social health. Healthy foods reduce costs to our healthcare system. But when you or I are standing in a store with a limited money in our pocket, at that point in time, unhealthy foods are usually cheaper.

[slide: subsidies]

There are a number of reasons for this, but one important factor is that animal agriculture receive vastly greater subsidies than do vegetable and fruit farming. In the US, meat and dairy receive 63% of ag subsidies, while fruits and vegetables receive less than 1% of the subsidies. Or in gross terms, in 2016 there was a subsidy of \$63 billion to animal agriculture while there was only a subsidy of \$17 million for vegetable production. It is impossible to completely sort out the direct and indirect agricultural subsidies, but some studies suggest that without subsidies, a fast food hamburger would be \$13, which would certainly make that salad look a lot better.

The issue of having good access to adequate amounts of healthy, appropriate food is called "food security". When I first heard about food security I thought it was about this:

[slide: guarding potatoes]

But food security is really about the security of people to know that they can feed their own families properly. This requires adequate finances. And it requires knowing how to eat healthily in the first place. And today, it also requires people like us changing and learning new habits because here in Canada, we are not eating properly and our governments are subsidizing the wrong types of food.

[slide: world]

Last year on World Food Sunday I preached about veganism - living a life without eating meat, dairy, or eggs. In summary, animal agriculture causes the death of 60 billion land animals very year. It is now understood that eating animal products contributes in a big way to human diseases including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. It is now clear that animal agriculture carries massive environmental costs, including deforestation, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. And since taking food and putting it through an animal is a very inefficient process, animal agriculture contributes to global malnutrition.

And I've been surprised that in the past 12 months, there here been an explosion of vegan food options appearing - at fast food chains, IKEA, Costco, and many other places. Many celebrities have spoken in support of veganism. I often try to read the tea leaves of our society and understand where we are headed, and this time, I actually nailed it. There is a growing global consensus that meat, dairy, and eggs represent death, not life, and vast numbers of people are embracing veganism. The future is vegan.

Globally, there is enough food to feed everybody. There is even enough healthy food to feed everybody if everyone ate properly. But our attachment to animal agriculture - including meat, dairy, and eggs - prevents the system from working properly. Our attachment to animal products kills animals, it is killing us, it is killing the planet, and it is killing those who are malnourished because the food they need was fed to an animal instead.

The solution is simple. We have to live simply, so that other may simply live.

Like the rich man, Jesus wants to love us into new life. Like the rich man, perhaps we don't really want to make the required lifestyle changes. Will we chose life or death? What will you chose? *Amen.*