

Peacemakers Share the Bounty of the Earth

Sharing Food as Peacemaking

Text: Leviticus 23:39-44

**Sermon Note: Due to a re-arranging of our worship series material, we ended up reading a text about Israel's Festival of Booths, which might more appropriately be read in the Fall, during harvest time. The Festival of Booths was celebrated and continues to be celebrated around September or as late as early October. **

This morning we gather on the beautiful land our church is located on, under this beautiful sky, and we share together the bounty of the earth. Already we've shared strawberries, and after the service during our picnic we will share more food: we will share the land's crops in the form of buns for our hot dogs and burgers; we will share meat from the animals who were raised on the land and who gave of their life for our sustenance; and we will share other vegetables and fruits the land has provided us – and we will do so all the while rejoicing before the Lord – maybe not for seven days as our scripture reading suggested, but we will rejoice together nonetheless! During the planning for this worship series on “Seeking Peace Together,” I've had a lot of fun thinking about how to incorporate food into the experiencing the story times. I think food is intimately tied up with worship and discipleship and that is why last week I brought in Peas for peace to get us thinking about how what we eat impacts the earth and why today I brought strawberries to help us consider how we are called to celebrate, savour, and *share* the bounty of the earth. But now I think we have to dig a little deeper into the idea that savouring and celebrating food through *sharing it* can be an act of peacemaking.

As I planned for today's service by reading through our text from Leviticus 23, beyond being pleasantly surprised at the coincidence of our camping weekend with this text describing Israel's Harvest Festival of Booths or Huts, I was struck by the fact that God set down *in law* Israel's celebration and sharing of the nourishment of the earth – a law that would be in effect

from generation to generation (all the way up to today). The festival of booths was not only a mandated a harvest *celebration* for Israel, however, it was also an act of worship within the much larger context of many other laws and festivals that helped them embody their faith in God's provision – helped them remember that God is the source of salvation and life and peace. During this festival, Israel was to live in booths “so that [they] would always remember that God brought them out of the land of Egypt” – God was the source of their peace, their *shalom* and well-being. There is something profound, I think, about the way this celebration joins together feasting *with* temporary make-shift shelters. It was a reminder, for Israel, that their planting and harvesting, their enjoyment of the nourishment of the earth, was not simply a reward for their own hard work, it was also a gift of God given in season, a gift that could not be hoarded or stored up. And with that mindset, Israel was told to celebrate!

There are very few things that help us humans celebrate more than good food. Food sustains our bodies and minds, brings us pleasure, and allows us to express our creativity - and food sustains the human community. From the very beginning of the biblical story—food—the bounty of the earth, has been provided within the context of God's gift. But, in scripture food has also been a source of danger and an occasion for conflict, as well as the misuse of God's good gifts. The danger begins in the beginning - Adam and Eve are commanded *not* to eat some of the earth's bounty and later they reap the consequences of choosing to disregard that command. Not only that, Adam and Eve's transgressive eating caused a rift between them as they blamed each other for eating the fruit. Later, the food offerings of Cain and Abel would become the occasion for the first murder recorded in the Bible, and of course there are many more stories in Genesis alone, where food is at the center of the flourishing or floundering of God's people. Then there is the book of Exodus, with the lack of food in the desert as well as God's miraculous provision of

manna – again, not to be hoarded but received as a gift to be shared. In the desert Israel learned to not take the bounty of the earth for granted but to be grateful for the provision of God.

And then we come to the book of Leviticus, concerned as it is with the intricacies of ancient ritual practices of animal sacrifices and fruit and grain offerings. *Food*, in Leviticus, is squarely placed at the center of Israel’s worship of God and Israel’s self-understanding as a people set apart from the nations of the world. Throughout this Priestly book of the bible – a book that has all too often seemed irrelevant, strange, and insignificant for modern Christians – we hear of intricate, detailed instructions regarding what can and cannot be eaten by Israel, how certain food offerings are to be presented to God, when certain foods can be eaten and when they must be left alone, and on and on. There is a whole dietary system prescribed for Israel in Leviticus that to us Gentile readers and hearers today is hard to make heads or tails of. Many scholars and theologians argue that the most basic reason for why God gave Israel these dietary laws was to set them apart from the nations – to distinguish them daily in their most basic life-practice of eating.

Of course, by the time of the New Testament, food and dietary laws became not only a distinguishing mark of God’s people but also again a flashpoint for conflict as the Good News of Jesus the Jew spread among Gentiles. As far as we know from the few pieces of evidence present in the Gospels, Jesus seems himself to have kept kosher and observed all the common Jewish festivals. He followed the Jewish dietary laws as outlined in Leviticus and Deuteronomy – and he even is recorded in the Gospel of John as celebrating the festival of Booths (see John 7:1-38)! This might seem surprising to some of us. Wasn’t Jesus controversial for breaking with Jewish dietary laws? A closer look at the Gospels reveals that Jesus was controversial, not because he broke with Jewish dietary laws but because he ate *as a Jew* in company with those deemed unfit

or untoward – tax collectors and sinners. The broadened and inclusive sharing that took place in Jesus’ table fellowship offended some of his own people. But I suspect that Jesus knew his scriptures well enough to remember that the Torah had already set down a trajectory for inclusive eating and sharing together. In Deuteronomy, for example, when gave further instructions about the Festival of Booths, he said this about who should be included in the celebration:

Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. (Deut. 16:14)

Jesus’ practice of inclusive table-fellowship was, I think, his way of honoring God’s law.

Jesus’ disciples would learn too how to practice an ever more inclusive table fellowship. That famous scene in Acts 10, comes to mind, where Peter has a vision of a sheet with a variety of unclean animals that God told Peter to “kill and eat.” Again, God was not telling Peter, a Jew, to no longer bother with Jewish dietary laws, but rather was inviting Peter not to apply his distinctions between clean and unclean food to human distinctions like Jew and Gentile. If God was at work in the lives of Gentiles, then thanks be to God, he could celebrate table fellowship with Gentile believers, even if that made things a bit more complicated. Despite food laws still being a sensitive and ongoing debate fought out in church councils (see Acts 15) and among Jewish religious leaders and new Gentile adherents, sharing food, or at the very least sharing table fellowship, was something that Jew and Gentile were uniquely enabled to do together through a unity established for them in Christ – and it was an act that was in itself a witness to God’s work of peace that broke down social, cultural, and historic barriers between peoples.

Interestingly, this new sharing between Jew and Gentile, this expansive table sharing that God was drawing Peter to, had a prophetic precedent that loops us back to Leviticus and the Festival of Booths. In the prophet Zechariah, there is this profound vision that the prophet has

regarding a future time following upon God’s deliverance of Jerusalem from all of its enemies – the vision includes all nations streaming to Jerusalem year after year to “keep the festival of booths.” (Zec. 14:16) Scholars note that of all the many festivals proscribed for Israel in the book of Leviticus, the Festival of Booths seems to be the only one with a universal reach – the only one that Gentiles would be enjoined to keep.¹ I find this fascinating to reflect on as we gather today as followers of Jesus to share in the bounty of God’s goodness, with tents on our lawn and food ready to be shared. While we may not be streaming towards Jerusalem together, here we are, thousands of years later, people from far off nations celebrating God’s bounty and learning what it means to share it as an act of peace.

Sharing food as an act of peace: is this something you and I can imagine today, in our own context? I will leave us with some questions to get us thinking about sharing the earth’s bounty as a form of peacemaking: “Who shares space and food with us around the table?” When we’ve answered that question, our next challenge will be to determine if we are at peace with those people, and perhaps an additional challenge will be to discern if there are some people missing, people that in God’s vision of human flourishing should *not* be missing – and if they are missing, to invite them to the table. May it be so. May we be a people who celebrate the goodness of food together with all as a testimony to the God of peace. AMEN

One final suggestion – when you eat your picnic lunch together today, before eating, turn to those around you and say: “Peace be with you.”

¹ For an in-depth article on this, read Dr. Rabbi Joshua Garroway’s article here: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/sukkot-the-festival-of-future-redemption-for-jews-and-gentiles>