

SERMON SEPT. 21

Sermon Title: A Demanding Decision

After growing weary of lectures about food, author Tracie McMillian left NYC to go undercover into the American food system. She wanted to get a ground level view of how Americans actually grow, produce and make decisions about food. She moved to California to work farm fields, to Detroit to work in the produce section of a suburban Walmart, and finally back to NYC to work in an Applebee's restaurant. Applebee's did not have any openings in food preparation, but she was offered the position of expediter---according to her---the hardest job in the restaurant. But, what does an expediter do? An expediter, I discovered, coordinates the presentation and flow of food in the restaurant. And, as she explained, if an expediter does not do the job right, then the orders don't look right, and people won't come back, and server's tips will be lower, and the restaurant will not make as much money. So to speak the expediter is the first domino in line, if the expediter fails, everything goes down.

I didn't know what an expediter was so I was surprised at the voluminous responses and descriptions posted online. One can even study to become a food expediter. As I looked around I wondered if food expediting might be another method to treat everything as a means to an end. From this perspective, could it be said that food expeditors exploit food to please customers so they will give big tips, come back to the restaurant again and keep the business alive and preserve their jobs? But one of their roles is also careful attention to the presentation: to inspect every plate to make sure proper garnishes have been applied and that dishes are free of smudges and spills

before being delivered to the customer. Doesn't food presentation count for something? It can draw attention to the food itself, helping us to appreciate its flavor and beauty. Maybe it can even be said that it helps us eat consciously, rather than unconsciously. In recent years, many have begun to try to eat with greater consciousness of the food before them, for in a "fast-food" culture, we eat unconsciously all the time---without calling to mind the faces and hands of the people who planted and harvested the food we eat, who prepared it and served it. Did they receive a decent wage for this work? What risks did they have to take? Slow eating---eating at a slower pace--- is also extolled as a means by which to eat more consciously and to pay more attention to our food, including how it is produced, prepared and presented.

The Reformed theological tradition talks about sin as the depravation of the good; this can involve exploitation of the good. In this understanding of sin, salvation entails an exposure of the exploitation in order to restore the essential goodness. I wonder if there is a sense in which food expediters stand on both side of the equation---in some respects, commodifying, food but at the same time, drawing attention to the gift of food, its beauty and taste, prompting appreciative thought about those who produced, cooked and served it.

The lectionary for this Sunday in Lent prompted my chasing these options for in the Gospel text from John 12, Jesus employs a striking metaphor to speak of his imminent passion---a metaphor drawn from the food chain: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." This statement conveys an intriguing qualification: if it dies. Dying is necessary for the seed to produce fruit. Soil was fragile and nutrients could be depleted. Therefore, the Torah prescribed a sabbatical year, during which the poor were to be released from their debts, the enslaved were to be freed and even

the land was to rest in order that the soil might be revitalized. These prescriptions did not emerge in a vacuum---they were needed because the opposite was happening. In fact a Jewish scholar was once asked if there is any evidence that the sabbatical year was ever enacted on a wide scale, and he replied probably not. This suggests that in Jesus' day, poverty, abuse of the economic system and the desertification of the land was an enduring part of life---as they are also in ours.

In light of the notion of the sabbatical year, the dying seed is a striking image for Jesus to use to speak of his crucifixion. The great paradox of the dying seed is that the very place of great potential (rich soil) is also a place of potential exploitation (and depletion of soil). The dying seed in the ground raises to visibility both the potential for exploitation and the potential for fruit bearing and abundant life. Indeed, when Jesus says "Those who love their life will lose it," he is contending more than survival ---and certainly more than exploitation for private gain. For Jesus, "hating" one's life in the world entails rejecting self-absorption and exploitation. The fruitful and abundant life to which Jesus points us is a life of loving service with and for others, rather than a life of exploitation of others and the earth. Resisting exploitation can be costly, as there may well be backlash to resistance---even a cross! But the fullness of living with and for others is the fruit of life lived in Jesus the Christ. If grain falls to the ground and dies, it will rise in, with and for others. So the cross, as a dying seed, is about exposing abuses of power and dying to exploitation of others and the earth, and rising as the fruit of God's love for others and the earth. Or, to paraphrase the words of the prologue to the Gospel of John, the light will shine in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it! So be it, Amen and Amen!!

Pax et Caritas,

Bill Anderson