

There are few things that are more central to our lives than food. And it is naïve to believe that food is merely about nutrition and pleasure. Food is significant in many ways. It often defines a culture, it creates family and community traditions, it signals certain festivals and seasons. It's very deep.

And religions have always used food as a way to help their adherents identify more closely with their faith. Virtually every religion has food rules. Muslims don't eat pork, Hindus avoid beef, and many Buddhists refrain from meat altogether. Some Christian denominations believe their religion forbids consuming alcohol of any kind. And I for one am happy to be an Anglican.

The Jewish religion has one of the most complex and intricate set of food laws, which they call Kosher law. Kosher law, like many other religious food laws, sees some foods as clean, and thus allowable, and other foods as unclean and forbidden. For Jews pork and shellfish are unclean, but it is ok to make corned beef or pastrami which are delicious imitations of pork.

During the time of Jesus, there was a movement of people who called themselves Pharisees, which comes from the Aramaic word meaning *separated*. The Pharisees believed that Israel had strayed from God, and that God would not send the Messiah until Jews became more observant and strict about obeying the Law of Moses including the food laws. They said that God was withholding sending the Messiah until he saw more action on the piety front.

Pharisees were known for taking the Law very literally. They were fundamentalists. And Jesus often debated with members of the movement about the place and the nature of the Law in Jewish life. The Pharisees were apparently very interested in Jesus, because they were often found in the crowds listening to him, but they were critical of him as well. They complained when he healed on the

Sabbath, which they considered work; or when he ate with people who they considered unclean (prostitutes, those who collected taxes for the Romans, ferry workers, and such people), and Jesus criticized the Pharisees for being so obsessed with their ritual purity that they often missed the point of the Jewish faith and its message of love they neighbour as thyself. They were always bickering.

Jesus did not object to the Law, and often said so. What he objected to was the superior attitude, the smugness and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

In today's Gospel reading this disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees comes into sharp focus. Stop obsessing about what you eat, Jesus says. You should be more concerned with what comes out of your mouth than what goes in it.

The Law, for Jesus, is not about pleasing God or jumping through hoops. The Law is designed to bring people into right relationship with God and with other people. But the Law by itself is dead, as St. Paul says. It comes to life only when it is energized by faith, that is trusting in God's goodness, and love of God, of self and of neighbour.

One of the central themes of Jesus' teaching is that it is not just our actions, but our intentions that are important, not just our adherence to the rules, but the state of our heart. Jesus criticized the Pharisees not because they were so pious and strict, but because it was clear that their primary reason for being so pious was to impress others.

Back to the Gospel, after his teaching about not getting obsessed with ritual purity, Jesus seems to illustrate his point by conversing with a Canaanite woman, an Arab, a person definitely considered unclean by the pious Jews. Even Jesus' disciples tell him to send her away. Jesus transcended the culture of his day, a culture that pitted religious people against the non-religious, the righteous against the

sinner, the clean against the unclean. He connected with everyone, he opened his heart to the outcasts and sinners.

This kind of thing is what eventually got him executed.

So what does this mean for us? We don't have these strict rules about what we can and can't eat, although it could be argued that we are more obsessed with food than ever. And we don't divide people into the clean and the unclean, or at least we try not to. So what does this Gospel have for us this morning?

There are many ways to read this Gospel. What has occurred to me as I reflected on it this week, is that it is an invitation for us to reflect on our own priorities, on what we think is important, on how much attention we give to the externals in life, and how much we work on cultivating hearts that are open and free of judgement.

We live in a culture in which we are told that our judgments, our preferences are all important. We are told that whether we like something or not, whether we think something is right or wrong, whether the music in church, or our nephews career choice, or our neighbours new car is to our liking or meets our approval really matters.

Personal preferences have become the ultimate criteria for everything and we have all fallen into this way of thinking.

The problem is that that this primacy of personal preferences is an illusion and a trap fed to us by the media. The illusion is that our personal preferences matter. They don't. And the trap is that when we fixate on our preferences on what we want the world to be like, we cut ourselves off from the world as it really is. And we cut ourselves off from God, because we put ourselves in God's place. I read a Buddhist sutra the other day that has stuck with me: It says, *personal preferences separate heaven and earth forever.*

What Jesus objected to in the Pharisees, is that they clothed their personal preferences with the law, claiming that whatever **they** did was what was the right thing. However **they** chose to follow God was the correct way. And that whoever and whatever **they** decided was clean or unclean, was clean or unclean.

Jesus said of them, that they were like the blind leading the blind.

All of us who are religious have a bit of the Pharisee in us. It kind of comes with the territory, but you as a parish community have been doing this great work of coming together as one Christian community. And from where I have been sitting it is clear that at the centre of this work has been a letting go; a letting go of your personal preferences, a letting go of judgment, a letting go of needing to be right. You have cultivated hearts that are open, hearts that are free to explore new ways of being church.

I know this hasn't always been easy. It has required real sacrifice, but I also know that you have gone forward with the belief that it is the spirit of God that is leading you. I share that belief.

And the evidence is clear enough. God's spirit is evident in this place.

And as I have perhaps said before, the work that you are engaged in here is not just for you. It is like a pebble dropped in a pool of still water. It will ripple out to the wider world in ways that we may never know. And this is perhaps the greatest letting go of all.

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August 20, 2017