
Food: Choose Life
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 10:17-31

Before we begin, I'd like to give each of you a small gift. I am tempted to actually share a physical object with you. But many of us are online, and I don't want anyone to feel excluded. So I will just describe what I want to give you.

I want to give you a piece of paper. And here is what is printed on the paper.
[image: black dot]

And now I'm going to tell you that the piece of paper with a dot on it is a gift from me to you. And I'm going to ask you to reflect on that gift and how it relates to your life. Take a moment to consider that wonderful gift.

Does anyone want to share how this gift relates to your life? I have done this before, and usually nobody wants to share. But a few people have. And those people all told me that the black dot reminds them of some negative thing in their lives. Which I find a bit odd actually. I gave you a piece of paper with a black dot on one side. But you were free to take it from there. You can focus on the black dot. Or you can focus on the other 99% 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 most of you probably 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?

Our gospel gives us a glimpse into that. 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 from Mark, 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. Do not kill. Do not 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 “do not 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. What Jesus is asking the man to do is possible. 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. 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 hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom after all. What else could Jesus be talking about? For me, the most exciting drama in this story is when two amazing things happen that our ears perhaps did not 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 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 cared about the money itself, I think Jesus would have negotiated with the man. But he did not.

There's another reason why I do not 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 wants to join the church, we would never say that. We would probably hope that they would join the church as a rich person and then donate a lot of money to the church 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.” The man would have shared his money but kept his status. Instead, Jesus invited the rich man become poor first, and then to follow Jesus. The man was invited to join the Jesus club as a regular person. Not a person with status.

And there is 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 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 problem was his attachment to his possessions. 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. Perhaps an attachment to who we thought we were before the pandemic. Or for us here at Chapel in the Park perhaps an attachment to who we were before our amalgamation. And again, the objects of our attachment are almost never the problem. But our attachments to those objects can limit our ability to turn towards Jesus and to move into new life.

What do you think? Do we carry attachments for something from our past that is limiting our ability to turn towards new opportunities and new life? This can easily happen to us as individual people? It can also happen to us as a congregation. What do you think?

To me, the gospel story is a very sad story. Because Jesus offered the man life, and the man was not interested in making the required lifestyle changes. My favourite line is “Jesus, looking at the man, loved him and said ...”. In this story, Jesus is not out to one-up the guy. Jesus is not out to score points with the audience. Jesus only wants to love the man. 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 lets out a long, deep sigh of resignation. Jesus wants to love the man into life, but the man chooses status quo and death.

By now I hope you are wondering 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 you can go get your lunch. Sorry, no such luck. Here it is. Jesus wants to love the man into life, but the man chooses status quo and death. And the choice between status quo and death in favour of new 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 food should be a source of life.

As our 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.

Consider these 2 people. For both of them, food is connected with death. The person on the left is dying from lack of food. 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 instrument 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: \$1 burger vs \$5 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 - at least on the surface. 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 grocery store with whatever money is in our pocket, at that

point in time, unhealthy foods are usually far cheaper.

There are a number of reasons for this. But one important factor is that animal agriculture receives vastly greater subsidies than do vegetable and fruit agriculture. In the US, meat and dairy receive 63% of agricultural subsidies, while fruits and vegetables receive less than 1%. For example, in 2016 there was a subsidy to animal agriculture of \$63 billion. In the same year, the subsidies for vegetable production was only \$17 million. 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 cost \$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:

[image: guarding potatoes]

I thought that food security meant guarding the 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.

I just made the sweeping statement that Canadians are not eating properly. What do I mean by that? We are eating in ways that are bad for our own physical health. And we are eating in ways that reduce global food security. In another equally sweeping statement I will declare that the problem is our attachment to animal agriculture.

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 5 years, there has 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. Many people are now embracing veganism. And a huge number of people are not choosing to be vegan, but are substantially reducing their consumption of meat, dairy, and eggs. Marjorie and I are not vegan, but we have greatly reduced our consumption of meat, dairy, and eggs. As a society we are - slowly - turning away from death and turning towards life.

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 efficiently. Our attachment to animal products kills animals. But it is also killing us through disease. It is killing the planet through climate change. And it is killing those who are malnourished because the food they needed was fed to an animal so that the meat from that animal could be sold to wealthy people in another country.

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 do not really want to make the required lifestyle changes. Will we chose life or death?

Let's choose life.

Amen.