

Date Preached	09-May-2021	Date Initiated	27-Apr-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Easter 6 (Rog'n), Yr B

"I do not call you servants any longer, ... but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." "



I hope everyone had a hearty breakfast this morning,* because we're going to be talking a lot about food for the next several minutes, and I don't want to make you hungry! Have you ever noticed how prominently food and eating feature in Scripture? The apple in the Garden of Eden; the manna and quail God provides the Israelites in the wilderness; the endless dietary laws in the Book of Leviticus; Jesus' feeding of the thousands with a few loaves and fewer fish; and the Last Supper when He feeds the Twelve, both physically and spiritually, the night before He dies.†

And Jesus also *talks* about food and farming all the time.‡ From parables He tells about the sower and the seeds; the wheat and the tares; the mustard seed; and the wicked tenants in the vineyard ... to His frequent injunction, heard again today in St John's gospel, to His disciples to "go and bear fruit" ... Jesus often uses agriculture as a metaphor to explain the workings of the Kingdom of God and our responsibilities as the disciple-heirs of that Kingdom. There are so many layers of messages when Jesus uses these simple farming metaphors:

- First, He conveys the depth of God's love for us, by reminding us that God has blessed us with creative powers. God has made humanity—alone of all God's creatures—co-creators with God: has endowed us with intelligence and skills that allow us to combine disparate potentialities of nature—seed, water, sunshine, soil—and produce, by God's grace, a new creation, be it a tomato or a tree or a flower. Through our labors, we create outputs far more valuable—more *fruitful*, we might say—than the sum of their inputs.

* Full disclosure: My personal embrace of many of the norms of Anglo-Catholic piety has never included the custom of fasting before receiving Holy Communion. I fully understand the ascetical logic behind this practice, and I usually fast two other days a week. Sunday—the Lord's Day—has, however, never seemed to me an appropriate time for denying oneself the reasonable necessities of living.

† To this list we might add (off the top of my head): the stew with which Jacob swindles famished Esau's birthright; the famines Joseph leads Pharaoh's Egypt through; Jesus' almost constant meals with His disciples as well as with tax collectors and prostitutes; and the breaking of bread and eating of fish by which the disciples recognize Jesus when He appears to them after the Resurrection.

Indeed, the lead-up to the account from Acts we heard today of Peter's beginning to preach salvation to the Gentiles is a strange dream he has while napping before lunch: All sorts of animals Jews are forbidden to eat appear to Peter, and he hears a voice telling him to kill and eat them. In his dream, Peter, a devout Jew, tells God that he won't eat what is profane or unclean, but a voice replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15). By this food-dream Peter comes to know that Jesus has acted to save *all* humanity and not just Israel.

‡ If we think about it, the prominence of food in Scripture shouldn't surprise us. Food is a basic necessity for life, but until very recent times, the scarcity or impurity of food was an almost constant existential threat to all humanity. And then as now, gathering for meals is one of the most fundamental ways of offering and accepting hospitality: breaking bread being a way that many can become one.

- Second, through agricultural images—cultivation and husbandry—Jesus reminds us we enjoy a certain autonomy: the ability to care for and sustain ourselves. God does not seek our subservience: either constantly beseeching God for sustenance, or forever living in fear that God will, one day, cut us off. No, the fruit of our field labors is far more than mere calories. Our ability to provide for ourselves gives us agency and dignity. Like God, we can make choices and take up efforts that we find both useful and satisfying.[§]
- Third, as anyone who has grown zucchini already knows, the capabilities God has planted within us consistently yield far more fruit than we need for ourselves. Therefore, Jesus' agricultural images remind us of our duty to nourish *others*, in turn: to 'reciprocate' the gifts God has given us by paying them forward to those who are hungry; forward to plants and animals, by caring for them with kindness and treating them with respect; forward to the entire ecosystem—air, light, soil, water and climate—lest we, through unthinking exploitation or hedonistic grabbing, truncate the generative energies of creation that God intends to be infinite.

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How powerful—*radical*, really—are the gifts that God bestows upon and Jesus perfects for us at the Resurrection: the power to create, as God creates; the dual privileges of self-sufficiency and dominion, which God has; and our being ordained into ministering the care of others and of creation itself, as God does. These Easter gifts make us 'mini-Gods' ... 'little Christs' ... in the most humble and reverent sense. In rising from the grave, Jesus rebirths the human order to share in God's eternity and participate in God's divinity ... which means that we, too, play a role in the Easter Heaven-ing of this world.

But lest we get too carried away, we must recognize that in possessing heavenly powers in this earthly world, we also must emulate God's wisdom in deploying them. We must follow the example of Jesus' humility and servanthood.

- Alone of all God's creatures, we have the ability to fuse and split atoms; to synthesize new molecules; to splice together and edit genes; to modify and manipulate entire ecosystems. But we do not hold this creation power for our pleasure or amusement, as child with toy. Creativity has been given to us *from* God's goodness so that we may *do* God's goodness, as we see and know that goodness embodied in Christ Himself.
- God lacks for nothing and has gifted us with the ability to satisfy all our worldly needs: by planting and plucking up; by consuming and conserving; by controlling and liberating. But with God's power of self-sufficiency comes God's *perspective*, as well. For the mission of God is always toward bounty and thriving; toward harmony and perfection. As we exercise our agency to satisfy our needs, how we choose to consume and exploit creation must *also* serve the ultimate good of all ... and not just

[§] Cf the refrain in Genesis 1: "And God saw that it [*i.e.*, what God had made] was good."

the selfish fulfillment of our own desires.

- And finally, we must come to see our responsibility for others' welfare as a gift and not a burden. God created us *in love* and *for love*: so that God may love us and we may love God. And Jesus came to love us by *serving* us; by *sacrificing* Himself for us. Therefore, when we sacrifice our gas-guzzling cars or re-adjust our thermostats to benefit the common good, we are privileged to participate in God's love. When we declare rivers off-limits to pollution or pay to restore hazardous wastes, we rejoice in multiplying God's love. When we diminish profits so that the whole world may eat or pay taxes to develop clean, renewable sources of energy, we are following the example Our Savior set every day of His earthly life, including the last one.

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The powers of creation, self-sufficiency and sacrifice: divine gifts of benevolent grace ... and, at the same time, awesome responsibilities. If we bristle at and resist the latter—bemoan our having to care for and accommodate others—then this world seems no Heaven at all. We will chafe and grumble all our lives, waiting to be *sprung*: to be freed from these earthly burdens and cossetted in an eternity without cares. But when we grasp that these responsibilities are, in fact, a part of God's *total gift* of Easter grace ... that they accompany God's sharing with us of the power of creation and the freedom to choose ... then we come to see the Easter Heaven-ing of this world: the Heaven that God has generously implanted it in every one of us ... in the hope that we will, in turn, cultivate it every way, and everyone, we can.



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