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Sermon 20 June 2021

Title: Food for Thought 3 (Under New Management)

- Good morning church—it is wonderful to be with you on this beautiful Sunday morning and we are so glad that you have joined LargsNaz online today—whether you are watching from our Sunday Brunch here in Largs or from your own home or from one of so many other places all around the world, we welcome you---and wherever you are, we are glad that you are here with us.
- This is the third Sunday in our “Food for Thought” sermon series that takes a look at scriptures from the Old and New Testaments where food plays a particularly important role. Two Sundays ago we went all the way back to Genesis Chapter 3—where Adam and Eve, in the time of their Edenic innocence and guiltlessness, reach out and grab that forbidden fruit. The title of that sermon was “No Substitutions” because we suggested that what Adam and Eve had done was to take a look at the menu that God provided them with, and to say that it wasn’t good enough—that they wanted something else—a substitution—something that wasn’t on the menu, and something that God had told them they shouldn’t have. And we saw that throughout the Biblical narrative God, time and time again, reaches out to humanity offering redemption and reconciliation and liberation—but time and time again His people do not accept his provision, or find fault with what is provided and want something else—and that was certainly the case in the 11th chapter of Numbers, which we considered last

week. In the Book of Numbers we heard the story of those who were travelling with the children of Israel through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, after they had been freed from slavery in Egypt—and as they travelled they were being sustained and nourished with manna from heaven—but for some of them that provision was not acceptable, because they had a craving—a craving not only for meat but for the past—and so we talked about the pathological nostalgia that they were afflicted with, and how damaging it was not only to themselves, but also to those around them, those who were participating in the miraculous work that God was doing in their present, and who were moving toward the promising future that God had in store for them—a future that the folks with a craving for the past didn't get to take part in.

- Now, today we are going to jump ahead in the Biblical narrative all the way to the gospels—the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus and his disciples—today's scripture is sometimes called the story of “Plucking grain on the Sabbath” and it's found in all 3 of the synoptic gospels—John doesn't mention it—of course John doesn't mention a lot of things that the other 3 gospel writers include—but Matthew chapter 12, Mark chapter 2, and Luke chapter 6 all contain the narrative in today's scripture, the story of “Plucking Grain on the Sabbath”—each of the gospel writers tell it in a slightly different way of course—
- “Plucking grain on the Sabbath” is one of several “Sabbath controversies” that we find in the gospels—And these stories are called the “Sabbath controversies” because they involve somebody doing something that, at least in the eyes of the

religious authorities, they shouldn't be doing on the Sabbath, because the Law forbids it.

- I grew up in a Nazarene pastor's home, and when I was a young boy I used to hear all sorts of opinions about what people should and shouldn't do on the Sabbath—on Sundays—it was obvious that we should go to church, twice, morning and evening, and of course take a nap in the afternoon—but I also heard from church folks, Sunday school teachers and other kids, and my parents—about things that we shouldn't do on Sundays—I heard that we shouldn't work on Sunday—that included not just the work you get paid for but any kind of work, on your car or your house or your boat—I remember hearing people say that any work you did on Sunday, you'd have to re-do on Monday—and I also heard that we weren't supposed to go shopping—when I was younger, it was the 1970s in the American Deep South and there were blue laws that made sure that most shops were closed so there wasn't much shopping that you could do on Sunday anyway—but I remember one time when I was about 8 years old, I had been trying to make sense of the mixed messages that I had heard from different people about what was and wasn't acceptable to do on Sunday, and I got to thinking about the fact that both of my parents—my Mom was a nurse and my Dad was a preacher—both of them worked on Sundays—and got paid for it—they did their jobs on Sunday—the day that we were supposed to rest and not do any work. And so I asked my Mom about that, I said, “Mom, how is it that you and Dad both work on Sundays? I thought we weren't supposed to do that.” And she told me that people's physical and spiritual needs

don't take a break just because it's Sunday—people still need to be taken care of and provided for 7 days a week—at the church and at the hospital—even on the Lord's day. And that was a good enough answer for me, and it still is.

- Today we are looking at Matthew's account of "plucking grain on the Sabbath," and Matthew gives us some different details about what's happening compared to Mark and Luke, but the basic events are the same, and those events are really quite simple—not a whole lot happens in terms of action, or what we might call "plot" using dramatic terms, in these 8 verses in chapter 12 of Matthew's gospel—really there's just an act that the disciples do, then the Pharisees see it and tell Jesus about it, and Jesus responds to them. That's the scene in a nutshell. But just because not a lot "happens" in these verses, that doesn't mean there's not a whole lot of meaning in them, and a powerful message for each and every one of us this morning.
- So I want to walk through these verses by looking at each of the 3 parts of the narrative—firstly, what the disciples do, and then secondly, how the Pharisees respond, and then finally, how Jesus responds to the Pharisees.
- Verse 1 sets the scene and tells us what happens. It's the Sabbath, and Jesus and his disciples are on their way to the synagogue—we know that because that's where they get to down in verse 9—so Jesus and the disciples, we might say using modern terminology, are on their way to church on a Sunday morning. And as they travel, they go through a field—the NRSV tells us it's a grainfield—but the King James says it's a cornfield—but the Greek term that's used doesn't really specify exactly what's growing, it refers to the fact that it has been planted

intentionally—so this isn't a wild field, it's a field that's been planted on purpose by somebody.

- And as they walk through this field—the disciples are hungry and they start plucking the heads of grain and eating them—eating this corn or barley or wheat that had been planted
- Now I have eaten fresh corn right off the stalk, but barley or wheat in the field—well, I have never been THAT hungry—but apparently the disciples are—maybe they woke up late and skipped breakfast, I don't know—but they're not going to walk past the Bagel Basket or Nardini's and get some breakfast like we might be able to do on a Sunday morning— they know they better eat while they can, because the synagogue that Jesus and his disciples are going didn't have a Sunday Brunch with Belgian waffles and quiche and banana bread—at least I don't think they did
- And so that is part one-- what the disciples do. They have plucked heads of grain and eaten them. On the Sabbath. And the Pharisees—the religious authorities who are following Jesus and his disciples around—have seen them do it—because they've been watching.
- You know it's nothing new for followers of Jesus to be watched closely by the authorities—and not just the political authorities but the religious ones, too—some of the folks who watch other folks the closest are religious types--those who spend too much time making sure other folks are doing what they think they ought to be doing and not enough time watching themselves and doing

what God tells THEM to do, which is to meet the needs of other people—the kind of folks who love their rules and regulations more than they love others—

- You know the word “Pharisee” comes from a word that means “to set apart,” and the Pharisees in the gospels are portrayed as a group obsessed with setting themselves apart from other people, enforcing their standards of holiness and propriety on those they think aren’t as righteous as they are,
- And they do this by creating and enforcing a dense tangle of rules and regulations and keeping a close eye on anyone who might step outside of them or call them into question. And they spend so much time and attention on that project that it prevents them from being the kinds of leaders that the people need them to be
- So here is Part Two—the Pharisees’ Response: the Pharisees go to Jesus and tell him that his disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.
- Now the Pharisees are not saying that the disciples are doing something that is in itself unlawful, AND that they’re doing this unlawful act ON the Sabbath—that is, the Law at that time allowed for travellers to pick and eat from someone else’s field as they travelled, and that’s what the disciples are doing here—but the problem is that they are doing this picking, this harvesting, this WORK, ON the Sabbath—a day when work is not to be done
- And the Pharisees are not just making this rule up on the spot, they are speaking with the voice of tradition and the Law behind them—the requirement that certain things were not to be done on the Sabbath had a long history—it reached all the way back to creation, when God created the world in 6 days and rested on

the 7th and blessed it and set it apart as a day of rest—that's in Genesis, and we talked about the events around creation on our first Sunday of this series—then later on in Exodus 16, God tells the children of Israel who are travelling through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land not to harvest the manna, the bread of heaven that He was providing, on the Sabbath, because that was a day of rest—you'll remember we talked about the Hebrew people gathering manna in the wilderness last week—then in Exodus 20 we see that “remembering the Sabbath day and keeping it holy”—doing your work 6 days a week and resting on the 7th—is one of the 10 commandments—and then in Exodus 31 we see a punishment assigned to violating the commandment to rest on the Sabbath—in Exodus 31, beginning at verse 12 we read: “(Y)ou shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; **everyone who profanes it shall be put to death;** whoever does any work on it **shall be cut off from among the people.** Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day **shall be put to death.** Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.”

- “Whoever does any work on the Sabbath shall be put to death.” So it is a capital offense that the Pharisees believe they have witnessed Jesus’ disciples committing—if in fact they are working, and if that work profanes the Sabbath. And the letter of the Law seems to back them up.

- But just plucking some heads of grain and picking the kernels off, though—is that really work? Is that what you’d consider reaping or harvesting or threshing?
- As you can imagine, it would have been pretty important for the law to be quite clear about what constitutes “work”—those things that a person is not to do on the Sabbath—and it was indeed—in fact, over time that prohibition in Exodus developed into several categories of Sabbath restrictions—things that were considered work and that were forbidden—here they are now—there are 39 of them—things like building, and demolition, tying and untying, starting a fire or putting one out, and cooking or baking—boy we’d be in trouble at our Sunday Brunch—but each one of these categories had further specifics within it—for instance you may have seen “ploughing” on that list—and you know what ploughing is—it’s using a plow to create trenches in a field before you plant—but the prohibition on ploughing didn’t just prohibit using a plow—it prohibits any preparation of land for agriculture—and not only that, it also prohibits dragging something in the dirt, like dragging a chair across a dirt flow, because that creates furrows and in the eyes of the Law that’s ploughing—
- And so if you wondered if the disciples were guilty of breaking the Law here—there is no question that in the eyes of the Pharisees, and in the eyes of the Letter of the Law as it had come to be detailed and explained and interpreted by the religious authorities—they most certainly are
- And the accusations of the Pharisees show us what had happened to the Law as those in authority used it to maintain their authority and to exert their power over others—what had begun as a command to take a day off, to rest and be

restored and not work yourself to death had turned into an instrument of fear—
had turned into the threat that you better not do anything we think is work on
the Sabbath or we'll kill you—

- Now there are several reasons that the Pharisees would have considered what the disciples were doing not only unlawful—but also wrong--first, what the disciples are doing is wrong because they are failing to respect the Pharisees' authority and the authority of the Law by disobeying the letter of the Law; second, they would have seen the disciples as being disloyal to their people, the Jews, because good Jews follow the Sabbath restrictions—and thirdly, they are demeaning and disrespecting what is holy—namely the Lord's Day.
- And based on their reading of the letter of the Law, of course the Pharisees think that what the disciples are doing is unlawful and wrong—they're guilty—but the Pharisees and their reading of the Law are not the only authority—they do not have the final word—because Jesus is about to speak.
- And that's the 3rd part of our scripture—Jesus' response to the Pharisees.
- Now surely Jesus knows what authority the Pharisees are referring to when they accuse the disciples of doing what's unlawful –all those written laws and restrictions and details back in Exodus and beyond—and so here verses 3 and 5 tell us that Jesus responds to the Pharisees by appealing to the authority that they are using—the written word—and so Jesus says “Have you not read?” Have you not read about David and the bread in the temple—have you not read about priests breaking the Sabbath?”

- Or are you only taking the scripture that you want to use and interpreting it literally and in isolation? You can't just take one scripture that you agree with and forget the rest—you have to read and consider and interpret in relation to the entirety of scripture—and ask whether your interpretation lines up with scripture as a whole—this is a hermeneutical lesson straight from the mouth of Jesus that quite a few Christians have not yet learned 2000 years later—Jesus is saying to the Pharisees that they can't just take Exodus 31 out of the context of the larger narrative—Jesus is saying to them, you've obviously read Exodus 31 but have you also read 1 Samuel 21—or are you going to adhere to the written word in one scripture but not in another?
- Don't you know, Jesus also asks, that priests break the sabbath laws and are guiltless—and the implication here is that Jesus is connecting his disciples and the priests—foreshadowing the idea of the priesthood of all believers—but Jesus goes even farther than that when he compares the grain that the disciples are eating to the Bread of the Presence that would have been on the altar of the temple when David and his men were allowed to eat it—he is making an analogy between the temple and the space where they are—and so Jesus tells the Pharisees that “something bigger than the Temple is here”—something new—something that fulfils the Law and expands the temple and the presence of God—because the Kingdom is about to go out into all the world--and these Pharisees are witnessing the very presence of God in this place outside the Temple—they are in the presence of an authority beyond the written word of the Law—Jesus himself, who holds authority as the Living word—as the Bread of

Heaven who is the very presence of God—so that what is here even in this cornfield is, as Jesus says, bigger than the Temple—because the Son of Man has arrived—the Kingdom of God is at hand and the people of God, and all of creation, are under new management—

- Here and elsewhere, like in chapter 23 of Matthew’s gospel Jesus lets the Pharisees know that they have failed in their calling to lead their people—in chapter 23 Jesus calls the Pharisees blind guides—he says to them “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. . . .”
- We surely see this in today’s scripture-- the Pharisees had turned the Sabbath from a day of rest to a day of stress—from a day for relaxing to a day that was taxing—under their management the Sabbath was no longer refreshing but was now oppressing
- But when Jesus arrives the people of God are under new management, because Jesus is in charge--and that’s what Jesus lets the Pharisees know when he declares that the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath—and that the Sabbath was made for the people, the people weren’t made for the Sabbath
- He’s letting them know that they’ve gotten things upside down—they’ve put the letter of the law above people’s needs—looking to the past, they’ve missed what is happening before their very eyes—that’s that “pathological nostalgia” we talked about last Sunday--and so Jesus says if you’d known what it means that God desires mercy not sacrifice, you wouldn’t have accused my disciples who are

guiltless—God desires mercy not sacrifice—I love the way Eugene Peterson’s “Message” translation puts Jesus’ words—he writes, beginning with verse 6: “There is far more at stake here than religion. If you had any idea what this Scripture meant—‘I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual’—you wouldn’t be nitpicking like this. The Son of Man is no yes-man to the Sabbath; he’s in charge.”

- “The Son of Man is no yes-man to the Sabbath; he’s in charge”—and the Son of Man has come not to restrict God’s provision, not to forbid the meeting of the needs of the hungry, but that the world might have life and have it abundantly— This is the whole POINT of the Sabbath—not simply adherence to the letter of the Law but the living out of mercy and grace and love
- Over the past two Sundays we have seen how God’s provision was met with critique by His people, first in the garden of Eden and then in the wilderness—but this week we have seen that the Pharisees tried to use the Law itself to withhold and prevent God’s provision for his people—but Jesus steps in and says “I’m in charge here—I have come to bring abundance not scarcity; freedom, not fear—my yoke is easy and my burden is light—and what God wants is lived-out grace and mercy and love, not ritualistic performance and empty religion”
- My prayer today is that we would continue to be a church that embodies God’s grace and mercy, that proclaims and enacts the good news that Jesus is in charge of the Sabbath, and He can be in charge of all of our other days as well.