

The final installment of the narrative lectionary's preaching series on the Lord's Supper gives us Matthew's version of the occasion on which the Pharisees reproved Jesus for letting his disciples pick grain on the Sabbath. It is, of course, a violation of the spiritual discipline of abstaining from work on the seventh day—you are supposed to have prepared food the day before so that you can spend Saturday relaxing in the love of God who provides for us. But Jesus and his disciples were rootless; they had no cupboards in which to store food for the next day, and so on this Sabbath as they walked through the grain fields, they simply picked the heads of grain and ate them. That's work.

Jesus defended his disciples to the Pharisees by referring to a precedent set by David and reported in 1 Samuel: "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests." So this reference provides another set of resonances for us to hear when we celebrate communion. Last week I talked about the resonances with Jesus' table fellowship—his disregard for barriers between people, his concern that people be fed, his appreciation for celebrations and parties. This week rings another set of changes: communion as emergency rations for those in peril, God's sustenance when we need it most.

But wow, this story Jesus referred to is a morally complicated story! Let me back up and give it some context. David the shepherd boy had heroically killed Goliath. This had started some buzz about King Saul's possible deficiencies as compared with this younger, more virile champion. I don't know how much buzz

was real and how much was manufactured by Saul's paranoia, but this is where Saul's love-hate relationship with David really hardens into animosity. Saul starts accusing David of fomenting rebellion against him (and Saul may have a point, but the story is told from the perspective of David's loyalists). David and Saul's son, Jonathan, are deep, close friends, and Jonathan tries to speak up for David to his dad, but Saul is having none of it. They become convinced that David's life is in danger and he should flee Saul's court.

So that's what he's doing when he shows up at the sanctuary at Nob and asks the priest, Ahimelech, for bread. He is a fugitive without a plan or a safe house. He doesn't know whom to trust, and so he lies to Ahimelech, telling him that he's come on an errand for the king, top secret, nobody must know. My guess is that Ahimelech sees right through him because people who are sent on top secret missions have a cover story, they don't just spill their guts to any questioner. But Ahimelech plays along. He has bread, but it's bread that was offered to God yesterday so only priests can eat it. David assures him that the young men he's ostensibly meeting have stayed away from women, the way soldiers are supposed to at wartime, so they're pretty ritually clean. And Ahimelech gives him five loaves.

Then David wonders if Ahimelech has any weapons lying around that he could borrow, because he left on this secret mission so hastily that he didn't have time to bring anything of his own. Coincidentally, Ahimelech has Goliath's old sword in the vestry, so David says that will be fine and he takes it.

Now, Jesus' point in hauling out this scripture reference when he's arguing with the Pharisees is that David himself felt free to eat consecrated bread right out

of the sanctuary, which is forbidden, so why shouldn't hungry men pick and eat grain on the Sabbath? It's a proof-text perfectly designed for Pharisees, because it's an example of a hero breaking ritual laws similar to those his disciples are breaking. But I can't help but hear more in this story.

First of all, there's Ahimelech. He sort of presents like Father Barry in "On the Waterfront," or maybe the tough priest in "Sleeper." There's a scene in "Sleeper" where the priest accosts a guy who's been threatening another, smaller guy, and tells him that if he beats up the smaller guy he, the priest, will beat up the big guy. Then he says, "See you in church," and peels away. That's how I see Ahimelech. He knows something is up with David, and he probably can guess it's a problem with Saul, and he kind of bends the rules a little so that he can give David what he needs to survive. The "I'm on a secret mission and didn't have time to bring my sword" story is pretty transparent, but Ahimelech plays along; he's a tough guy himself.

Then David runs off to King Achish of Gath but realizes shortly that King Achish might not be friendly, so he pretends to be insane and drools in his beard until Achish loses interest and David can run away. Again, it speaks to the level of David's panic. He clearly does not have a plan. But when he has run away from Achish he goes to the cave of Adullam, where he begins to bring together relatives and people distressed by debt or discontent, and he assembles a kind of Robin Hood's Merry Men which actually *is* a threat to Saul. Maybe Ahimelech anticipated this, because we see very soon that Saul blames him for it.

Second, there's this throwaway line about Doeg the Edomite, chief of Saul's shepherds, happening to be present, "detained before the Lord." Why is an Edomite

worshiping the God of Israel? We are not told. Maybe he's not worshiping, maybe he's making a delivery or something, but strangely, he is "detained" so that he's present for this furtive appearance by David. One chapter later we find Doeg ratting David and Ahimelech out to King Saul, and shortly thereafter, on Saul's orders, Doeg kills Ahimelech and 84 other priests for good measure. So David's mad dash to save his own life has resulted in the deaths of 85 people.

This is a morally ambiguous story, and David doesn't necessarily come off well in it. But how could anybody come off well in such a charged and treacherous environment? Even my personal favorite, the priest, knowingly arms someone he suspects to be in trouble without knowing how wisely he's likely to use the sword. Maybe he thinks David is a troubled innocent because his cover story is so terrible, but it's pretty reckless to give Goliath's sword to Mister Secret Mission For The King. Doeg the Edomite is lurking around like a Slytherin, ears wide open as David discusses his needs with the priest. I give a bit of a pass to Saul, because at this point he's clearly mentally ill, but what about all the people around him enabling him? Could nobody see what a toxic combination Doeg and Saul would be, given Saul's paranoia about David?

And maybe all this complexity actually enriches the resonance with the Lord's Supper for us. Certainly the bottom line is that when we are on the run and in extremis, God finds resources for us. But I'd take it even farther and point out that we all live in a context of moral ambiguity, and I think it troubles us even when we're not thinking about it. We know that the earth is in danger, that our well-intentioned efforts to help others sometimes have bad consequences, that we are

enmeshed in relationships that are not 100% healthy. Like David, we find ourselves in situations for which we had not prepared. Like Ahimelech, we are asked to take sides urgently without time to figure it all out. Perhaps like Saul, we can be prisoners of our own warped perceptions. We are always reassessing, trying to figure out how to do better and also how to *be* better, but speaking for myself, my progress is too slow.

And into this grimy, slimy little world of ours Jesus comes bringing bread and wine, offering us consecrated nourishment to give us strength right here, right now. Did the bakers of the bread intend it for consecrated recipients? No matter, Jesus has brought it for us. Should we wait until a more appropriate time, when we're all cleaned up and unlikely to offend anyone? No, Jesus says people who are hungry now ought to eat now. The Lord's Supper is a meal for people with dirty hands who don't have their stories straight, who are making it up as we go along. God knows exactly who we are. And God wants to keep us going with bread for the journey. May the mercy that we are shown translate into compassion for others in our morally ambiguous world.

Let us pray: God who sees all and offers us bread for the journey, may we find at your table the space to breathe, reassess, remember that we are not alone. Grace us with unentanglement, that we may more straightforwardly do your good will and delight in your good presence with us in every time, on every occasion. Amen.