



Mike and Sandy Sigmon C3 Sermon Challenge



Winner

Megan M. Pardue

2021

About Megan M. Pardue

Megan M. Pardue is the lead pastor at Refuge Home Church in Durham, NC.

She is an ordained elder in the Church of the Nazarene and a graduate Southern Nazarene University and Duke Divinity School. In addition to pastoring, she teaches preaching at Duke Divinity School.

Megan cares deeply about environmental justice and climate change and believes communities of faith must address these crises with urgency.

She lives in Durham with her husband Keith and two young children. Megan enjoys growing a large vegetable garden and raising chickens on their lot in the city.



C3 is very grateful to Mike & Sandy Sigmon for their generous support of the C3 Sermon Challenge.

It is the goal of this program to raise awareness of climate issues by nurturing the development of meaningful sermons and encouraging dialogue and discussion.

"Eat What is Good"

Isaiah 55:1-3a

Rev. Megan M. Pardue
NTS Preachers Conference

Context Note: I preached this sermon at a denominational gathering of pastors, preachers, and church leaders at Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, MO. At one point, the sermon references The Manual, which is a book of worship and order in the Church of the Nazarene. A dinner invitation from Isaiah 55, when the hope of returning home is on the horizon:

Isaiah 55:1-3a:

All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!
Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!

Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!

2 Why spend money for what isn't food,
and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?

Listen carefully to me and eat what is good;
enjoy the richest of feasts.

3 Listen and come to me;
listen, and you will live.

I remember the inside of that kitchen as if it was the kitchen in my own home...the giant pots for spaghetti dinners in the cupboard near the microwave... the lever of the industrial dishwasher that made doing the dishes somehow appealing...and the corner cabinet up high that held treasure boxes full of sugar cubes. The air was always thick with the smell of coffee, as if the pot was never off. Stacks of styrofoam cups sat waiting to be the vessel that warmed each weary soul with that day's fresh brew. Just as permanent a fixture in this kitchen as the oven and stove was the executive chef of Beaverton Nazarene, Steve Pettis. And there next him, his teammate for all occasions, who could transform a dark carpeted gymnasium into a banquet hall for the masses—my mother.

I can't count the number of feasts orchestrated by these two and their dedicated teams. Wedding dinners, funeral receptions, all church potlucks, chili cook-offs—and the long awaited Christmas Eve and Easter brunch. Steve made this rich blueberry cream cheese French toast—the anticipation—people talked about it for weeks. I remember standing in the buffet line gripping my plate impatiently, genuinely concerned that the French toast would be gone before I made it to the front of the line. But there was always enough. We would eat and be filled.

Isaiah's dinner invitation reads—All of you, who are thirsty, come! All of you without money, come, buy food and eat! I don't care what you've heard about never showing up empty handed—this isn't that kind of dinner. Who cares that your bank account is in the red—just come! By the rivers of Babylon you have sat and wept till your throats were dry and your stomachs roaring, oh but Israel. The homecoming dinner is on the horizon. All you need to attend are hunger and thirst.

This is a dangerous invitation, not for Israel, but for Babylon. This is the kind of party that disrupts the way things have always been. They can't be handing out free lunch, not after we've spent so many years showing you there is no such thing. Free bread and milk? That's not possible and our entire economy is built on making sure you never forget it.

But this invite goes a little further and indicts Babylon for their foolishness. "Why do you spend money for what isn't food and your labor for what doesn't satisfy?" You've spent on the best military technology, on building a bigger and more attractive palace, on fine clothes and status symbols, but for what? Are these the lengths you will go to show that you don't depend on YHWH for food and water? You'll stop at nothing, even destroy the earth, to keep from noticing your fragility.

All of you who are thirsty, come. Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat. For exiled Israel, homecoming—it's geographical—putting their hands in soil, planting a garden again, seeing the streams and trees and hills they've only ever heard about in stories. But it's more than that, says Walter Brueggemann. Homecoming is about the geography of imagination.[1] Homecoming is imagining a world where we're no longer captive to the empire and their ways—spending on what isn't food and what doesn't satisfy, hungering after power and wealth and security without regard for casualties along the way. But Israel doesn't have to wait for this new geography! Homecoming dinner is today—without money, at no cost, buy wine, and bread and milk. Eat what is good. Enjoy the richest of feasts.

In the span of only a few generations, the empire captured our imagination and transformed how we eat. Most North Americans are distant from our food. We eat, yes, but food comes from the grocery store not the field, the restaurant not the barn, the tightly packed Blue Apron box not the backyard garden. I've never slaughtered a chicken, milked a cow, butchered a pig, pulled feathers off a turkey, or caught a salmon. It's really easy to eat without giving any thought to how the food ended up on the plate. How did my cereal get into this box and what are these 6 ingredients I can't pronounce? Who picked this apple, how much was he paid and where was the tree and how did it get here?

Since California and Central America can grow a whole lot of our staple produce most of the year, we can eat what we want when we want. Corn on the cob in Maine in February or watermelon in December in Kansas City—no problem! It never occurred to me until recently that blueberries aren't in season in Oregon where I grew up at Easter or Christmas time.

We're not only distant from the origins of our food—the land that grows it, the people that pick it and process it, the chemicals sprayed or injected into it—but we're literally distant from our food. In the US and Canada, food travels an average of 1,500 miles from the farm or factory to your home. While it's easy to blame changes in climate on coal-powered factories, gas guzzling cars, and forgetting to turn off the lights, truthfully, our food system is massively damaging. Almost one-third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions are directly linked back to our food—the distance it travels, keeping food refrigerated on it's cross country trek, the energy of producing those mystery cereal ingredients and the packaging to keep it all fresh. Eating beef tops the list of harmful food choices, since two cows produce as much greenhouse gas in one year as a car driving 15,000 miles.

This distance from the food we eat and the distance our food travels allows many of us to keep our distance from the land, so that we don't even notice the empire that's perpetually harming creation.

The subtle changes in weather don't bother those of us who move from a climate-controlled house to a climate-controlled car to the office and back again. It's the farmer who lost her orange grove because she couldn't afford to water it—she notices. It's the elderly man on a fixed income that can't keep his house warm enough in the winter—he notices. It's the migrant workers who lose their husbands to excessive heat exposure, over 500 a year in the US, these widows—they notice. It's the islanders in Papua New Guinea who have already moved, because there was no more dry land to call home—they noticed.

Less than two weeks ago, I found myself in a situation I'd never experienced before, where I had to notice. Despite living 175 miles inland from the coast of North Carolina, our house was right in the path of Hurricane Florence. I went to the store to buy diapers and found empty aisles—canned vegetables, soup, water and bread—gone. Gasoline—gone. Everywhere I went, I knew what complete strangers were talking about—all conversation like the low rumbling of the storm—the hurricane, the hurricane.

For the couple of days that the hurricane map predicted the storm right over my roof, I weighed my potential losses. I'll probably lose my garden. I'll lose the food in my fridge and freezer, when the power goes off. But what about those trees in the backyard?

Are they far enough away? They won't clear the roof. I might even lose my house. But I'll be alright. I won't lose my job. I can plant a garden next year. I can file an insurance claim. I can lean on my friends and my family who would give us a place to live for a while. I can continue living almost as I did before this hurricane and the empire keeps my imagination captive. Most people don't have such luxuries. And if we don't wake up and make a change, we won't either.

Does it really take a hurricane for me to notice? Record breaking ocean temperatures. Record breaking windspeeds. Never before have we seen so many tropical storms, or droughts, or flooding, or wildfires. This isn't just another storm or just another fire or just another bad winter. How we will live in relation to God's creation matters!

Our idols of capitalism, consumption, and convenience are literally punishing us to the third and fourth generations and they are already punishing our brothers and sisters around the world. Changes in climate most directly impact people who have done little or nothing to cause it—those who are poor, those without options, or access to resources. People live their lives exiled to the sacrifice zones of our choices, victims of pollution and extreme weather.

It feels insurmountable. It feels like there's so much to do. I reach out for something to grab onto and I don't even know where to start. And this is just where the powers and principalities want us to be—overwhelmed by the catastrophic nature of our dilemma and the destruction of God's great world. They whisper in our ears, "What is good is one small change? What difference will it really make? It's just food."

But the inbox is full of dinner invitations to set our imaginations free—sit down to dinner with hungry Israelites who received bread falling from heaven like rain. Follow the green pastures and still waters to the table prepared before you. Join us on the hillside with 5,000 of your closest friends where Jesus turned one person's lunch into a feast for the masses. Our Lord is the Bread of Life; it's his body that we remember when we gather at this table. When it feels like hopeless and impossible work, we head to dinner at the end of the road to Emmaus, when the disciples thought Jesus was gone. Gone. Until he broke the bread and their eyes were opened—hope is alive and with us when we eat.

Why do you spend money for what isn't food? Here is a place to start. What we eat matters. And since churches eat together, how we eat together matters.

A whole lot of conversations about food justice, eating ethically, locally, or organically go something like this: “I would love to buy better food, but it’s just too expensive.” Except why do you spend money for what isn’t food? For starters, take what your church spends on food each year—whatever you have budgeted for Easter brunch, Christmas dinner, the neighborhood block party, and all the meals in-between—take that amount in the church budget and double it. (And all the church treasurers gasped in disbelief.) This may seem impossible—but why spend money for what isn’t food? Do we really need flatscreen tvs in each classroom? Is the coffee cart really going to be what brings in the young people? Do we need to spend hundreds of dollars a year on printing and then mailing the newsletter? After all, The Manual says, “His Church ought, first, to keep itself simple and free from an emphasis on wealth and extravagance and, second, to give itself to the care, feeding, clothing, and shelter of the poor and marginalized.”[2] I didn’t make this stuff up.

Now if you are buying seasonal, local produce, it won’t require doubling your budget—it’s animal products that are the real expense. If you are pastoring in a congregation that is itself a marginalized community, this challenge is not for you. It’s for the rest of us. Instead of bringing our leftovers when it’s our turn to serve a meal in your church, we bring the first fruits of the harvest as we’ve been asked.

After the food budget is doubled, there are countless ways to begin opening our imaginations to eat what is good:

- Enough with the processed communion wafers. They taste like Styrofoam and cardboard had a baby. Eat real bread, baked in the kitchen of someone from your church. Drink real organic grape juice that hasn't been sprayed with pesticides before being poured into your chalice.
- And transform one of your beloved church recipes like Blueberry Cream Cheese French Toast into a conscious recipe. Take children blueberry picking in July during ordinary time, freeze the berries, and save them for Christmas.
- Reduce the amount of meat you serve, savoring meat for special occasions instead of a staple of weekly meals.
- Start composting behind your church building.
- Invite your congregants to meet for coffee on Saturday mornings at the farmer's market; hang out for 20 minutes, then head to shop.
- Find out who is growing food in your community. Visit. Learn. Volunteer. Partner with them.

- Find out who doesn't have access to fresh food and then do something about it. Metro Baptist wanted to address the lack of fresh produce in their community, but their church is surrounded by concrete in NYC. So they transformed their rooftop into a farm with 52 garden beds planted in kiddie pools.
- Host showings of some of the dozens of documentaries on these topics in your church and invite your neighbors to learn alongside your congregation. A lot of the people I know who aren't in church, would LOVE to see a faith community who cares about saving bodies, not just souls.

What we eat matters and how we eat together matters.

Isaiah's dinner invitation closes with a plea:

Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts.

Listen and come to me; listen and you will live. **Listen** and you will live?

Listen! Not only because what we eat is literally killing us! Heart disease, the cause of nearly one in four deaths in the US is directly linked to what we eat.

Listen! Not only because what we eat is killing the earth one meal at a time.

Listen! Not only because what we eat is killing the migrant workers who pick our blueberries in Washington and slaughter our chickens in Missouri.

BUT LISTEN. Because isn't it that we find life when we join the work the Spirit is already doing redeeming creation?

Isn't it that we find life when our imaginations are set free?

Can you see it?

The table is set before you. Dinner is ready. Until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Amen.

[1] Brueggemann, Walter. *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology*. Fortress Press, 1995, 50.

[2] *Church of the Nazarene Manual: History, Constitution, Government, Ritual and Sacraments*. Nazarene Publishing House, 2017.