

Working as a washerwoman, Oseola McCarty saved \$150,000. She spent little money on herself, binding her ragged Bible to keep Corinthians from falling out. In 1995 she gave the money as a scholarship to the University of Southern Mississippi to share her wealth "with the children."



Alan S. Weiner/NYT Pictures, Oseola McCarty

## "Becoming Doers of the Word"

An old established church stood at the intersection of two busy streets. Around the corner was a popular restaurant. One Sunday, a retired pastor and member of the congregation preached the sermon at the church. "If both this church and that restaurant burned down, which one would the neighborhood miss more?" she asked. The congregation stirred, and voices murmured in the sanctuary. "Well, which one?" the preacher repeated. Grudgingly, the congregation responded: "The restaurant." How many other congregations would answer in the same way? . . . Rev. Fred Craddock served a congregation that unknowingly answered restaurant. Early in his pastoral career, Rev. Craddock was called to a small comfortable church just as the government announced a large project that would bring many construction workers temporarily into the area. Seeing an opportunity for ministry, Rev. Craddock called the church leaders together and said: "What's our plan? They had no plan, he discovered, because they had no intention of reaching out to the newcomers. In fact, the board changed the church bylaws to state that for a family to belong to this church they must own property in the county. Years later while passing through the area, Fred Craddock stopped to visit the church. When he arrived at the site, the parking lot was full. Then he saw the sign: "All You Can Eat: \$4.99." The church was now a restaurant (UCC Sunday Bulletin, 8/11/09).

By the time Jesus had begun his kingdom work of bringing the reign of God from heaven into earth the light had gone out in the religious practices of temple Judaism. The do's and don'ts around food (food handling, distribution, preparation, eating and table fellowship) and Corban (mandatory temple tax) that had arisen in oral interpretation of the Law of Moses had gone bad. Those who ran things in Jerusalem were infected with the spiritual evil of greed, the human economic evil of profiteering, and the social evil of systematic elimination of the marginalized, sick, and powerless. So, when the gospel writer Mark saw that greed was giving a nod to usury and exclusionary practices in his congregation, he included in his telling of the good news the time when Jesus had a food fight with temple authorities.

The food fight started when the Pharisees tried to discredit Jesus by accusing him of violating Jewish purity codes. It continued with a Jesus parable on the reign of God's Love. It ended with a list of moral vices that sin against the Holy Spirit. In an effort to become doers of God's Word, let's first take a look at what Jesus did. In verse 5 we hear the Pharisees and scribes complain: *"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unclean hands?"* The question suggests that Jesus was known for the unacceptable habit of eating with people who did not wash their hands properly, who bought food that was not kosher into the marketplace, and who did not ritually cleanse their utensils. According to authorized interpreters of Jewish law, this made Jesus unclean and impure in the eyes of God. The reply that Jesus shot back at his challengers ignored their pietistic claims and brought to light the spiritual impurity underlying their finger pointing. How did he do that? He called them hypocrites and quoted the prophet Isaiah. Jesus said: *"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men'"* (6-7). In Jesus' eyes, they earned the title of hypocrites because of their tight religious gate keeping which isolated, marginalized, excluded, and denied people access to the life giving resources of community life. What did his eating with 'impure' people reveal about God's heart? When Jesus ate with unclean Jews he revealed the Holy Spirit who seeks to integrate all God's children into the community of faith and to share in their Maker's abundant resources of life.

A second thing that Jesus did was to teach an alternative way to interpret the cleanliness and purity codes of Moses. In an engaging word play with 'external/internal' Jesus changed the location of judgment from external to internal . . . the internal

place of heart. In Jewish thought, the heart is the seat of moral reasoning. It the place where the social imperatives of the commands of Moses plus Hosea's prophetic list of political crimes (theft, murder, and adultery) are deeply etched. *'For from within, out of men's hearts . . . all the vices of 'evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly' come from within and pollute a person* (vs. 7:19-23). Jesus taught that human reasoning of the heart goes bad when it justifies and scapegoats its own moral impurity by blaming its dirty dealings on others. In 'Binding the Strong Man,' Ched Meyers noted that the overall result of Jesus' teaching is that it 'ethicized, universalized, and subverted the justification for social segregation in the Jesus community' (p. 220).

Mark's church succeeded where Rev. Craddock's failed because, when they looked into their writings from their ancient prophets; when they took to heart the Torah for themselves rather than listening to the religious authority's interpretation of it; when they connected with the deepest desires of their own heart by praying together the wisdom psalm: *Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does this neighbor no wrong* (psalm 15:1-2) they finally got it . . . that the purpose of the Church is to get on board with the Holy Spirit's justice work of uniting people in God's Love. In their struggle for justice and peace, the faith of Jesus seeped into the fabric of their very being and they found the courage to integrate those deemed impure by human standards into their community. And, in their struggle with greed, faith in the compassionate spirit of Jesus and generous the heart of God led them to share their resources with the poor in society. And so, thank you Mark for your gospel testimony of faith.