

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

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It is not hard to figure out that I like food. Just take one look at me, and it's pretty obvious. Get to know me, and you'll learn about how much I love to cook. Stick around a while, and I'll cook again for Community Night on Thursday like I did this week, or you might get the chance to bid on a dinner I donate to our auction in May.

Many of you have already heard stories of mine that go along with specific recipes, or family gatherings in which traditional meals are important. Some of you have heard about the culinary adventures Eric and I have had on our vacations in our quest to visit all 50 states. If you haven't yet been regaled with such tales, just wait—those stories are all-too-common in my life.

I do love food.

I even love to use cooking and food as metaphor. Over the years of helping congregations look at how worship could better welcome younger people, I became known for my model of worship as an Ethiopian dinner—a shared experience of differently-spiced foods taken in manageable bites. Just a few months ago, I talked here about learning to cook as a metaphor for how we in the community learn to share our gifts in ministry to and with one another.

And yet, sometimes a food sermon is just a food sermon. And so it is today.

I believe that the choices we make about food, about cooking, and about eating have profound moral, ethical and spiritual ramifications in our lives—so much so that I would like us to think about them as a religious community.

The more I looked into this topic, the more I understand that many of us have lost our connection to food—a connection that can be, if we let it, deeply spiritual.

Have you ever gone strawberry picking and eaten a ripe, juicy strawberry right off of the plant, warm from the sunlight absorbed by the black cloth covering the strawberry mound?

There was a time a few years back when I did just that. In fact, my friend Elizabeth and I picked some sixteen pounds of fresh, ripe strawberries—and paid just a few dollars for the enormous haul in two giant boxes. Those berries were extraordinary; they were quite unlike the hard things with white centers found most of the year in green plastic baskets on the produce aisle.

They were so unbelievable that, driving home from the farm some fifteen miles north of Durham, we couldn't stop ourselves from eating our harvest—windows rolled down in my car, we littered the

highway with the little green crowns of the sweetest, juiciest berries I had ever eaten. When I arrived home, my mouth and chin were red and sticky and I was just this side of sick. We had eaten eight pounds of strawberries.

Growing up, I knew that milk came from cows—let’s be honest. But I figured that what came out of a cow was more or less what you got in the square waxy cartons and plastic jugs at the store. I learned better when I made friends with dairy farmers at Cornell. One day, a number of us visited the farm of a college friend of mine. His mother served us milk that had been collected that very morning.

“Holy cow,” I thought, pun intended. This creamy, dreamy liquid with the faint scent of new-mown grass had very little in common with the stuff of supermarkets.

I know that there are those here who have found fresh blackberries growing in the woods, those who remember the doughnuts made from fresh apple cider every Saturday in Armonk, and some of you here who tend your own gardens. I’ve got the homemade hot sauce I made from Eric Gewirtz’s red peppers to prove the latter point; for the record, I’m *still* enjoying that bag full of scorching-hot peppers I was given last fall.

Kim Severson wrote about a spiritual connection to food in a New York Times article on local farmers’ markets: “My church is a farm,” she says. “Give me a few chickens, a long row of carrots and the smell of dirt, and I’ll find the open heart and inner peace others might seek from a prayer book or pew. The connection between what I put in my body, the land around me and the miracle of things that grow makes me feel as if I’m part of something bigger than myself.”

She continues, “before you dismiss me as some sort of patchouli-scented wacko, allow me to share my hedonistic bottom line: a perfect ear of Long Island corn or a lovely little lump of Hudson Valley goat cheese simply tastes better to me than anything I might find in the supermarket.” (Kim Severson, “In Pursuit of Farm Fresh Flavor,” New York Times 8/19/07)

Country-folk songwriter Guy Clark once crooned that there are “only two things money can’t buy: that’s true love and homegrown tomatoes.” (Guy Clark, “Homegrown Tomatoes”) In his song, he sings:

“Get you a ripe one don’t get a hard one/ Plant `em in the spring eat `em in the summer/ All winter with out `em’s a culinary bummer / I forget all about the sweatin’ & diggin’/ Everytime I go out & pick me a big one” (Guy Clark, “Homegrown Tomatoes”)

Guy Clark reminds us of one of the essential elements of having a closer connection to our food—an element that many of us take for granted—the seasons. Tomatoes have their season.

There’s nothing like homegrown tomatoes because tomatoes don’t actually get tastier once they’re picked—they just get softer. And this time of year, tomatoes generally have to come from so far away that they’re picked at the peak of their—well, nothing. They’re hard and pink and tasteless this time of year, for the most part.

Barbara Kingsolver, in her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* writes (with her husband and daughter) about a year spent eating almost entirely locally grown and raised food. She was fortunate (and admits as

much) to have begun this endeavor on a small farm in the mountains of Virginia, where the growing season is fairly long. She also allowed the family just a few exceptions—olive oil, coffee and spices being the primary ones, since they are either not produced anywhere near where they live or, in the case of small amounts of dry spices, they take very little energy to transport.

Kingsolver's family experiment meant that they had to understand the cycles of growth and nature. They ate everything—from asparagus in the early spring to easily-stored root vegetables and hard squashes in the winter—in its season, or close to it. They froze pesto cubes when basil was in season, and dried cherries from a nearby tree. They learned to can tomatoes in the summer for use the rest of the year and to make their own cheese from local milk.

Who makes their own cheese these days? Who cans? My great-grandmother certainly did. I think my mother tried it once. Me—I've never had the guts. Maybe this summer.

Kingsolver writes, "Concentrating on local foods means thinking of fruit invariably as the product of an orchard, and a winter squash as the fruit of an early-winter farm. It's a strategy that will keep grocery money in the neighborhood, where it gets recycled into your own school system and local businesses. The green spaces surrounding your town stay green, and farmers who live nearby get to grow more food next year, for you." (Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, p. 69)

Our relationship with food has been harmed by a culture of convenience—in which it no longer matters *where* things come from, as long as they get to us when we want them. Raspberries in January? Sure—fly them in from Chile.

Our spiritual connection to the food we eat has also been harmed by a modern culture in which over-processed foods are so ubiquitous that we have ceased to think about foods in their whole forms any more.

Perhaps you've heard author Michael Pollan's slogan when it comes to figuring out what we should eat. "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants," writes Pollan. (Michael Pollan, "Unhappy Meals," *New York Times Magazine*, 1/28/07)

This slogan is deceptively simple in a world where "food" is hard to define. Every day, we are bombarded with studies of food components. Such studies invariably oversimplify a complex diet by focusing on only one or another nutrient even though we don't eat that thing by itself. It's no wonder it's hard to make sense out of any of it.

Think about our relationship with fats alone: saturated fats, monounsaturated fats, polyunsaturated fats, cholesterol (good and bad), trans-fats, omega-3 fats, omega-6 fats—we've all heard studies on each of those things, and the studies contradict one another. Which are the fats we're supposed to be eating this week? What are we supposed to be avoiding?

Can we, for example, finally eat eggs again without obsessing about our cholesterol levels? I know that I can't even buy a carton of eggs anymore without having to debate whether I want the ones with extra omega-3 in them. Never mind how they do that—they're a dollar more. Is it worth it?

Is that avocado sitting on the shelf a yummy and delicious source of guacamole, or is it instead a high-fat warning sign, or maybe, we now learn, a nutritional superfood—complete with vitamin E and beneficial, cholesterol-lowering fats!

Can I have a slice of bread with dinner, or will those carbohydrates wreak havoc on my dainty figure?

Even simple tea is not immune. No longer a soothing drink to enjoy with a meal or afterwards, tea is now an excellent, unbeatable source of vital antioxidants! Some days, I just want a nice cup of Earl Grey...but I feel guilty I'm not drinking the green stuff—it's supposed to be better for me, right? Never mind if I want some coffee.

When I visited my nephew for his third birthday a few weeks ago, I met a neighbor of my brother's family, a man who works for Heinz, and whose specialty is packaging. He was telling us about his efforts to reduce the amount of packaging they use—and about how such a thing would be good for both the environment and the company. He said that companies like his had to be creative about increasing profits—because, he noted, the market for ketchup isn't growing very fast.

I thought to suggest that perhaps it would if they could only fill capsules with the stuff and sell it as supplements of the antioxidant lycopene—famously found in cooked tomato products. If I didn't think he'd take my joke seriously, I might have even said so.

In the end, what are we supposed to eat? The answer is food. Whole food, as unprocessed as possible, a great diversity of it, and a lot less than you're probably used to eating.

As Michael Pollan writes, "try this: Don't eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food." What he means to steer us away from are heavily-processed foods, foods that make health claims based on one or another nutrient they contain, foods with unpronounceable chemical ingredients, and, high-fructose corn syrup. Don't even get me started on high-fructose corn syrup.

Why? Because, in a nutshell (no pun intended) that's what our bodies were meant to survive on. Food, mostly (but not necessarily entirely) plants, and enough but not too much.

But going through the supermarket, it's not easy advice to follow. I believe this is because we no longer have a connection to the food we eat: Meat comes not from animals whose treatment might matter to us, but from little Styrofoam trays with plastic wrap. Carrots are not long, pointed things that come from the ground—they are uniformly-carved two-inch-long nuggets that come in a bag. Coffee comes from a round red can, not from bushes growing on hillsides that need to be hand-picked.

Our modern society has many ways of removing us from our connection to food. Another among the culprits is today's agriculture industry, giant corporations who are working to increase their profits—often at the expense of environmental sustainability and farming practices that were developed over tens of thousands of years of human existence. Practices that helped farmers, at least, have a deep connection to the Earth they depended on. That connection, too, is in peril.

One reason is the advent of the genetically-modified food supply. Now, you might be thinking to yourself “he’s a scientist, right? Is he really warning us against science?” No, I’m not. To be honest, it doesn’t bother me if a company wants to splice a gene for beta carotene production into a rice crop, or if molecular biologists find ways to do things that used to be done with careful cross-pollination. To be honest with you, I wouldn’t even mind if scientists could figure out how to put pig genes into plants so that my collard greens don’t need fatback to taste yummy.

It bothers me, however, when the genes that are being put into plants that cause those plants to secrete pesticides—creating plants that could wind up killing monarch butterflies or ladybugs or honeybees.

It bothers me when the genetic modifications produce sterile plants just so that farmers can’t save seeds from one year to the next—forcing an ongoing dependence on newly-ordered seeds, and fattening the wallets of giant agribusiness companies.

It bothers me when companies are producing genetically-modified crops that make our farmers dependent upon chemical herbicides to grow their crops. Monsanto’s Roundup Ready™ gene does precisely that, making crops resistant to glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto’s chemical Roundup. Roundup Ready™ crops now account for some 85% of soybeans grown in the United States. The gene has also been spliced into corn, sorghum, alfalfa, canola and cotton.

Not only do these crops require enormous applications of chemical herbicides to grow, but farmers must purchase new seeds every year from Monsanto, making more money for the agribusiness giant and less and less for the farmers. And as Roundup Ready™ crops gain in popularity, some farmers are discovering they’re growing them whether they like it or not. (“Monsanto and the Roundup Ready Controversy,” SourceWatch, http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Monsanto_and_the_Roundup_Ready_Controversy)

Canola is a popular crop on the Northern plains of the United States—in North Dakota and Minnesota, as well as across Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta in western Canada. Monsanto’s Roundup-resistant crop accounted for one-quarter of Canadian canola crops by 1998, the year in which Percy Schmeiser, a Saskatchewan farmer, planted a crop from seeds from the previous year that, he had noticed, had developed a resistance to the herbicide despite the fact that he did not buy seeds from Monsanto. It would seem that plants and their pollen don’t know where one field begins and another ends—and that Schmeiser’s crop had been cross-pollinated with someone else’s.

Monsanto Canada sued Schmeiser, claiming an infringement on their patent. They won the case four years later in the Supreme Court of Canada, based on the fact that Schmeiser had actually noticed and taken advantage of the trait showing up in his crop. For hundreds of thousands of years, farmers have been saving seeds from crops with desirable characteristics, selecting for traits like disease-resistance and high yield. Perhaps (just perhaps) agribusiness has gone too far when this becomes a crime. (Sources: “Swathing and Harvesting Canola,” North Dakota State University, <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/plantsci/crops/a1171w.htm> ; “Western Canadian Canola,” Canadian Grain Commission, <http://www.grainscanada.gc.ca/quality/Canola/canolamenu-e.htm> ; “Monsanto Canada Inc. v. Schmeiser,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monsanto_Canada_Inc._v._Schmeiser)

The perils of agribusiness for our connection to the Earth through food hardly end with vegetables—I just figured I’d start there so that the vegetarians among us didn’t get smug when I brought up the horrible world of meat processing.

A search of the Times website for “beef recall” turns up 570 articles. Five hundred and seventy. I learned this when I was looking for information on the latest beef recall—an order issued two weeks ago that recalled some 143 million pounds of processed beef that made its way through a plant in California.

The beef was recalled after an undercover investigation by the Humane Society documented workers using such techniques as picking up sick cows with forklifts in order to pretend they could walk. Such sick cows—called “downer cows” in the industry—are fairly common, and are more likely than healthy cows to be infected with mad cow disease, among other things. (Andrew Martin, “Largest Recall of Ground Beef is Ordered,” *New York Times*, 2/18/08)

Why is our food supply riddled with meat from cows so sick they cannot even walk? Why have enormous corporate hog farms become reservoirs for antibiotic-resistant bacteria even as seventy percent of the antibiotics used in this country are fed to livestock? (Michael Pollan, “Our Decrepit Food Factories,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 12/16/07) Why are Australian honeybees, perhaps carrying foreign bee viruses (and no, I am not kidding) shipped to California every spring to pollinate almond orchards, and then shipped home once that job is done?

It is because our system of factory farming has become unsustainable, and we, far removed from any connection with our food, fail to notice.

What are the solutions? Where do we start rebuilding our relationship with food? Today, I offer three options: eat more locally, eat more fairly and eat food.

Eating food, we’ve already covered. I’ll spare you a recap.

Eating locally need not be an obsession, and it need not mean spending all of your free time tending the farm in your backyard. It does, however, mean eating things in season and paying attention to where your food comes from.

It might mean doing less of your shopping at a supermarket and more at a farmers’ market. If you’re really into this, you might consider joining a community-supported agriculture co-operative, in which you buy a share and, in return, get a crate of produce every week from June to December.

Now, you might be thinking that this is going to bankrupt you—so let me be clear: you will also save money doing this. Last summer and fall, I shopped at the Peekskill Farmers’ Market whenever my schedule permitted me to.

I found that for under \$20 (and often for under \$10), I could buy enough produce for me and Eric for an entire week—often including entertaining guests once or twice. The head of escarole that was \$1.99 at Stop and Shop (and trucked to me from California) was fifty cents (and grown in Dutchess County) at the farmers’ market. And it tasted better, too.

I have to say, the produce I got at the farmers’ market also lasted a lot longer than the stuff I got at the supermarket—it’s no wonder, given how much less time it had spent on trucks getting to me. This

August, I bought a zucchini squash that was still firm and delicious when I (embarrassingly) found it in my fridge drawer three weeks later. I've never had squash from a supermarket last more than a few days.

On the door to my office, I've posted a list of farmers' markets in Westchester and Putnam counties, as well as calendars of when various vegetable and fruit crops are in season in New York State. There is undoubtedly one near you. I hope you'll take a look at them, and, come June, I hope you'll frequent your nearest farmer's market.

We are also called upon to choose what we eat with an eye towards justice and fairness—for agricultural workers as much as for the Earth.

Choosing organically-produced things when possible means fewer chemicals make their way into our water. It also drives the market to make organic things more readily available—and cheaper.

Choosing grass-fed beef produced by small-scale farmers instead of grain-fed beef from huge conglomerates means supporting sustainable systems of raising livestock. Yes, it's more expensive, but you don't really need all that much—a serving of meat is, after all, three ounces, not a 16-ounce steak.

Choosing coffee that is certified to be fairly-traded, organic and/or shade grown means that the people growing it are paid a living wage, and that they are engaging in practices that help sustain the Earth.

These are just three ways in which we can eat with an eye towards justice and fairness.

Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants. Know where your food comes from. Know what it took to get it to you—the human cost, the environmental cost, the carbon footprint it left behind. Develop a relationship with your food.

What we eat and why are profoundly moral, ethical and spiritual questions. You are, after all, what you eat. Blessed be.