

With Every Bite
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

In between thanks-giving and gift-giving...
As the press of the season tries to hurry us...
May we recall ancient wisdom of this season...
A wisdom grounded not in speeding up, but in slowing down...

That we might better notice the gifts...
 within this season of growing darkness and scattered light:

 Gifts of contemplative calm...
 Gifts of light within the darkness...
 Gifts of gentle candlelight and firelight...
 Gifts of companionship and song...

Yes, may we notice and nurture the ancient gifts within the wisdom of this season...
 Not as the commercial world giveth...
 But as the world of stars and moon and earth giveth... as the heart giveth...

...as we give to one another – gifts of care and tenderness,
 aid and support... kindness and love.

Readings

Mark 6:34-44

When Jesus... saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages. Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five – and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the people who had eaten was five thousand.

From *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver

Having more than enough, whether it came from the garden or the grocery, is the agenda of this holiday... Wake up now, look alive, for here is a day off work just to praise Creation: the turkey, the squash, and the corn, these things that ate and drank sunshine, grass, mud, and rain, and then in the shortening of days laid down their lives for our welfare and onward resolve. There's the miracle for you, the absolute sacrifice that still holds back seeds: a germ of promise to do the whole thing again, another time.

...In my household credo, Thanksgiving is Creation's birthday party. Praise harvest,, a pause and sigh on the breath of immortality.

Sermon

The story of the loaves and fishes is surely one of the most evocative in the Gospels. And not because it is the story of a miracle worker when faced with way more people than he can feed in any ordinary way. That would be too easy, and too easy to dismiss.

No, if we read the story with any openness at all, we come away perplexed to begin with. We come away wondering, as the disciples clearly were wondering: What just happened here? We had a few loaves of bread and a little fish and we just fed five thousand people... and, as the Gospel of Mark has it, these hoards of people were "satisfied."

Plus there were leftovers... more than we had before!
What just happened?

Activist and writer Parker Palmer has a lovely chapter on the loaves and fishes in his book *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*.

He makes several points about this old story worth remembering.

Here's what I glean from Palmer's insightful exploration of the version of the story as told in the Gospel of Mark.

First, he notes that as dinner time approached and the question of how to feed these multitudes arose, the disciples wanted to send the people away to nearby towns and villages to fend for themselves.

But no, Jesus wanted to keep people together in community – no sink or swim everybody out for themselves. The message was that we can meet this hunger crisis if we stick together.

Second, Jesus has the disciples divide the five thousand into smaller groups. As Palmer puts it, good community organizer strategy: Get people into groups small enough that they can get to know each other as individuals and at the same time feel some meaningful sense of community solidarity.

Third, underlying all of this is a theology of abundance, rather than of scarcity. The disciples and probably everyone else assumed that there wasn't enough to feed everyone – so... it's everyone for themselves!

But Jesus assumed and taught everyone else to assume that abundance was in the very nature of things. So that if they stuck together and shared what they had, they would discover that they had more than they had thought. Which may be exactly what happened – not a miracle like a magic trick, but a more ordinary and more practical miracle that is simply about sharing. Once in small groups, the people may have discovered that actually many of them had a little to

share too. And so all were fed. A discovery of abundance rather than scarcity at the heart of things. (The kind of abundance Barbara Kingsolver celebrated in the second reading.)

Finally, as Mark puts it, in the end the people had eaten enough to be satisfied, or as John puts it, they had simply eaten enough. No need to eat too much out of a kind of fear of not having enough. We're in this together. We'll take care of each other. We'll be okay. We have enough.

Which is how we need to look at our situation on the planet today.

And food – what we eat, where the food comes from, how it is grown, how and how far it is transported, how well or how poorly it is distributed among the earth's people – food is a kind of linchpin on which hang a multitude of social issues and ethical choices.

And the story of the loaves and fishes reminds us of how the simple questions “What are we having for dinner; and how are we going to feed all these people?” are spiritual and ethical questions as well as merely practical ones.

Now, I'll warn you. Some of what I say today may make you feel guilty the next time you open your cupboard or look at what's on your plate. (I know that's the way all this makes me feel!)

But I intend my message to be a balanced spiritual and ethical meal. For I hope we will also leave today with a feeling of empowerment when it comes to the choices we have as to how to feed ourselves and our loved ones, a feeling that comes with the realization that the choices of what to buy and what to eat can actually make a difference – three times a day after all! – a significant difference when multiplied like the loaves and fishes in relation to a very wide range of critical social issues on the planet today: hunger, human rights, the health of our land and water resources, global warming.

I begin with a confession concerning my misspent youth. Way too many glazed donuts, barbecue potato chips, Lifesavers, bubble gum... we don't have time for the entire list.

Fortunately we did have to eat our vegetables at dinner.

But it was only a truly balanced diet if you consider that somehow glazed donuts and green beans balance one another.

Well, all this began to change during my sophomore year in college. That was the year I read Gandhi's autobiography, which he had titled *My Experiments with Truth* – and which began my experiments with vegetarianism... experiments which began with brewer's yeast in my orange juice and something called soy granules on my green beans (it's a wonder I stuck with it!).

But I've been a vegetarian ever since. And my multiple motivations for remaining a vegetarian are pretty much the same as they were for becoming vegetarian in the first place – including a belief that beyond what I consider to be personal health benefits and including my desire to cause as little pain and suffering to fellow sentient creatures as possible (as Gandhi put it, our power over animals should be used not to harm, but to protect)... but beyond all this, my belief that a vegetarian diet is also good for the planet and for the people on the planet (even a diet in the direction of vegetarian will make a difference – my own diet is hardly perfect and hardly the only way to make a positive difference through food choices).

How is a vegetarian diet – or at least mostly eating lower on the food chain good for the planet and the planet's people?

Well... to begin with, as you may already well know, getting our calories through meat consumes many times the amount of grain and other resources as getting those same calories directly from the grain. We have cleared untold acres of rain forest and other land to feed the apparently insatiable American and increasingly global appetite for fast food burgers from grain-fed beef. This means that were we all eating lower on the food chain, we'd be saving the rain forests, reducing global warming (even better, I've read, than buying a hybrid vehicle), and also more effectively feeding our billions of fellow human beings.

There is nothing new about this last point. Way back in the 19th century there were those who knew that, as one writer put it, meat eaten by the rich is grain stolen from the poor. Now we know that meat eating – certainly excessive meat eating – harms us all in a variety of ways.

Additionally, many more of us have also now come to realize that how our food is grown and how far it has come from field to table is at least as important as precisely what it is we choose to eat.

“Locavore” was the Oxford American Dictionary’s word of the year. So you may already know what it means. Simply put, a locavore is someone who chooses to eat, as much as possible, only or primarily food grown close to home – say, within a 100 mile radius – knowing that such food, often purchased at farmers’ markets for example, tends to be fresher and healthier, and also is far better for the environment, since far less oil is used in transporting the food.

Did you know that the average American bite of food has traveled 1,500 miles to get to your plate? In other words, much of our food comes, as Bill McKibben has put it, marinated in oil – and we’re not talking about canola. McKibben says that our current globalized model of food transport and consumption releases from 5-17 times the carbon dioxide as compared to local and regional models which could replace it.

In short, the American (and increasingly the planet’s) way of eating is a significant contributor to carbon emissions and therefore to global warming – not to mention global inequalities and species extinctions.

To further make the point: Barbara Kingsolver, in her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, describes a “sumptuous” winter-time dinner she was once served in New York. To conclude the meal, dessert was topped with fresh raspberries – raspberries which at that time of year had to have traveled from somewhere deep in the Southern Hemisphere. She mumbled her awe at how good the raspberries looked after their long journey. She writes, “I think my hostess was amused by my country-mouse naivete. ‘This is New York,’ she assured me, ‘We can get anything we want, any day of the year.’”

Well, as Kingsolver writes, she did her best not to be ungracious; and did eat her raspberries, seven raspberries in themselves not the end of the world.

But, as she also pointed out, multiply those raspberries along with all manner of other fruits and vegetables and grains traveling thousands upon thousands of miles... and we’ve got a real disaster – *not someday, but right now*, a real disaster. Yet unfortunately, as she concluded: “The conspicuous consumption of limited resources has yet to be accepted widely as a spiritual error, or even bad manners.”

But it is of course both – and ethically more than a little problem too.

So, you will be proud to know that our own Unitarian Universalist Association, through last year’s General Assembly, recognized this by resoundingly passing a new resolution – what

is called among us a “study action” resolution, which after several years of study and (we hope) action will become a shared Statement of Conscience... this one on Ethical Eating. You have a copy before you, inserted into your order of worship this morning. And you can go on line to find a really fine study and resource guide, filled with analysis of the various issues related to our eating (and they are indeed multiple as I’ve been saying this morning: climate change and the degradation of our environment; human rights – for the poor and hungry, for agricultural and food processing workers; as well as animal rights. The study guide also includes suggestions for individual and community action – from changes to our individual diets to how we might organize to change the entire food system.

Maybe we could all write letters to the President-elect to start with, encouraging him (as Michael Pollan does in an open letter he wrote in the New York Times Magazine several weeks ago) to buy local food for White House dining and to break ground for a vegetable garden on that expansive White House lawn. What an example *that* would be!

Well, as Parker Palmer reminded us, once you take the supernatural miracle out of it, the story of loaves and fishes is a story with deep spiritual and ethical meaning – as well as challenge. For it is a story about the deeper wholeness we feel as human beings when we manage to live in caring and sharing community; and it is also a story about the ethical choices we can make with the desire that *everyone* be well fed and well cared for, and that the land and water, our home the earth, are cared for too.

In short, just like the story of the loaves and fishes, the story of the food on our plates today is a story with spiritual and ethical possibilities and opportunities. This means that, as I said at the outset, we may leave today feeling guilty about some of the food in our cupboards and refrigerators (I know I will!)... but we can also leave feeling more empowered, knowing not that we will become perfect locavores, perfect vegetarians or vegans, perfect anythings (I know I’m not!)... but knowing that we *can* make simple choices – beginning the next time we shop – simple choices that will make a difference:

We can choose less processed food. We can eat lower on the food chain (less meat). We can choose food grown closer to home. We can decide that raspberries can wait till their season. We can, if we can afford it, buy organic – thereby bringing more health to the land and to those who work the land. We can, when available, buy fair trade – as we do here at Old Ship for our Fellowship Hour coffee, knowing that this, too, is better for the land, better for the workers of the land, better for their communities.

And these choices we make can also make more likely some critically important social and political changes – since our choices are multiplied (like the loaves and fishes) by thousands of Unitarian Universalists, and millions of others who are now part of a growing food and eco-justice revolution.

In short all of this is a recipe not for deprivation, but for sharing delicious, healthy meals, building community, and returning to a greener, healthier world.

How good – tasty we might say! – is all of this!

Finally, let me emphasize: Changing how we grow, process, and transport our food is not optional. For a more hopeful and greener future, it is essential. Fortunately, we can choose to make a difference with every meal at home, with every potluck supper here at Old Ship... with every bite.

So may it be.