



## Food

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The inherent properties of food: taste, smell, texture, flavor, color, appearance, size only begin to hint at the complexities inherent in what food means and how humans interact with food. Food, when you ponder and reflect on it deeply, and start to follow its history from seed to final compost, is more than complex. Everything behind its growth and development and in support of eating, and so consumption and disposal, interweaves threads that bind with other threads. There is more than a spider's web of beauty; it is more than a Gordian knot that cannot be untied. Irony of ironies: the food web is intricately and necessarily linked together. And me, I have been linked to the civic, social, political, economic, agricultural, and gastronomical aspects of food since I stumbled unknowingly and unwittingly into a labor dispute as a teenager. I have not stopped stumbling since.

So wrote our member Ken Stern about his relationship with food. He responded to my question to you, the members, about food and spirituality and I liked Ken's response because it was so layered and nuanced. The definition of spiritual is "of or relating to a person's spirit, religion, values, or ideals." How does food relate to your spirit, religion, values, and ideals? I received many responses to my question. Most fell in either the personal or the political realm. For this sermon I was looking for the personal first, because this is where each of us begins in our ideas, with ourselves.

After receiving comments from you and doing some research I have what I consider an odd observation, many conversations about food are controlling and judgmental and I wonder what this means. It almost seems like bad interfaith dialogue. People are afraid but I am still trying to figure out, afraid about what? The closest parallel I can find is when my son was born and I faced the breast milk vs. bottle feeding factions, both rabid on the ends. During this time, more than once I felt like my body was the subject of someone's ideology, and under that ideology was a desire for control of me, as a potentially breast feeding mother. But why?

I did not get it then, and I don't quite get it now. But there is something about food that is powerful, really powerful. Primal. Why else would we care so much?

What I hope to encourage this morning is space for reflective thought, and perhaps at coffee hour and later, reflection and conversation. Our children are learning about food allergies this morning, so families will have something to discuss. They are learning about allergies because we have a child in our congregation with significant allergies, the kind where the parents come armed with epi pens. Significant allergies. At the end of the day food is very personal. Cultures and religions have different understandings, and human bodies respond to food very differently.

Today's sermon leans personal, but there will be space for the political later. Some of us have seen the documentary Food Chains. Exceptional and it certainly changed my thoughts about where I will purchase tomatoes. We will be showing this documentary next fall and there will also be a forthcoming sermon on the political aspects of food, so there is space for both.

I wonder if food is prone to ideological thinking because it is essential for survival, food, water, shelter. Food is named first. Without food we die. Humans can live without many things, not necessarily happily, but they can live. Without food human die in less than a month.

So first, we are dependent on food, something that is essentially unreliable. The survival of plants and animals that we eat relies on sun, water, and shelter. This balance is easily upset by flood, drought, frost, pests, and illness. Certainly mass production streamlines food availability in the United States, but anyone here who has gardened or lived on a farm can tell you all about the unexpected death of crops and livestock. I am currently reading a book by a Soviet born author who remembers standing in bread lines for hours.

We are entirely dependent on food, and we are not in control of food, hard as we may try.

Think of how primal food is, many of us were breast fed by our mothers, and if not, there was some adult holding each of us, and letting us nurse from a bottle. Our early survival took hours of feedings, and while feeding, we looked into the eyes of the person/persons who held us. During this time we hopefully completed the first emotional task of infancy, trust and attachment. Trust and attachment, something essential to our emotional well-being and success in personal and professional relationships throughout our lives. It occurred while we ate as infants.

This food, emotional, social bond continues long after childhood. We celebrate and mourn in community and food is always involved. Birthdays have cake. Weddings and funerals have receptions. Holidays come with meals, turkey at Thanksgiving, and in my family, sauerkraut and kielbasa at the New Year. Religions are tied to food too, Ramadan breaks the daytime fast with a feast, Passover has a special meal and plate, and in Christianity communion was originally a shared meal. Sharing a meal is an act of sacred trust and generosity, at the core we are trying to sustain and save one another at the most primal level, by making sure we do not starve.

Second, food is primal in its connection to community. Gaut Ragsdale sent me a wonderful essay on barbecue from All Things Considered on National Public Radio. Written by chef and food critic, Jason Sheehan, it extols the virtue of barbecue. Sheehan writes

I believe in barbecue. As soul food and comfort food and health food, as a cuisine of both solace and celebration. . . I believe in barbecue in all its regional derivations [and] ethnic translations . . . I believe that like sunshine and great sex, no day is bad that has barbecue in it . . . I believe in the art of generations of pit men working in relative obscurity to keep alive the craft of slow smoking as it's been practiced for as long as there's been fire . . . I believe that barbecue drives culture, not the other way around. Some of the first blows for equality and civil rights in the Deep South were made not in the courtrooms or schools or on buses, but in the barbecue shacks. There were dining rooms, backyards and road house juke joints in the South that were integrated long before any other public places.

Sheehan reminds us in his description of barbecue, how food can cause community to gather and mix, similar to music. Food can break down community barriers and forge interest, shared experience and understanding. Food can be a sign of solidarity and support. Food can offer pleasure and fun. Crafting food can be an art. There can be a joy to baking, cooking, canning, slicing and dicing. This is the best of food in community. I can applesauce with a friend every year and my husband and I can tomatoes from our garden. I can soup with my mother-in-law. I bake cookies with my son. These are wonderful experiences.

Third, for most of us food is permanently linked with family and community. Rozy Park wrote

Being a child of immigrants, I wanted badly to fit in, and not seem different than the other kids, so I sometimes felt embarrassed when my friends happened to be at my house at dinner time, and my mother's cooking would generate spicy, peppery, and fishy smells. My friends LOVED the unusual foods and aromas, and when they joined us for dinner, the taste of my mother's cooking, they told me so, but that didn't stop me from feeling self-conscious that we weren't eating meatloaf and Campbell's soup casserole for dinner. Only much later in college did I begin to really appreciate my upbringing, my exposure to many different kinds of cuisines and flavors, and actually miss and crave my mother's delicious Korean dishes . . . Now when I think of a truly delicious meal, my first go-to is spicy Korean, Indian, Mexican. Who cares about fitting in? I gotta have my smelly, fishy peppers!

This past week we had a Board retreat at the Dendy Park household and Rozy's mother made us, from scratch, sushi and crab rangoon. Those of us gathered were in food heaven, but I well remember being a pre-teen and wanting to fit in and having friends stare at me when I told them that my mother made french toast for dinner, never for breakfast. It is even more complicated when someone come from an immigrant family, or is part of an ethnic or religious minority. And yet, ultimately, as Rozy describes, that family food that defines ethnicity and religion becomes a valued treasure, a source of comfort and memory, and sometimes humor. I have long enjoyed listening to my Jewish friends extoll the virtue and dread of matzah during Passover. Even better is going to Passover and finding someone's new use of matzah. Creativity abounds.

This is the best vision of a shared meal and food in loving community, but love is not found everywhere and primal needs can come with primal problems.

Food can be used or misused as a weapon, which breaks trust. Food can be scarce which leads to fear. Food can bring communities together, but it can also separate communities from one another - with rules about what food can be eaten. Food, a source of comfort, can be overused by those of us in pain (and who isn't in pain?). Families can engage in unhealthy eating habits that cause physical distress. Food can be forced in unwanted ways.

One of you wrote to me

I don't remember a time that I didn't have a negative relationship with food. With the help of therapy I've realized that food was a way of having control as a child in stressful situations I couldn't control. My family moved around quite a bit. I was shy and it was difficult to make friends . . . my family didn't share emotions - I learned to hide anything negative in order to keep the peace. Food was one way of keeping consistency and finding comfort . . . for example, McDonald's fries taste the same and are consistent no matter where you are.

This member went on to share that he has been diagnosed with EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) because his thoughts on eating and thinking are disordered. He explained this challenge, "The really difficult thing is that you have to eat. If this were alcohol or cocaine, just giving it up would be an option. But since food is necessary to live, you can't deal with this addiction like you can with others . . . the stress and shame associated with food is everywhere."

I know this member is not alone. I have long wondered if I have some disordered thoughts on food. I have a habit of eating sweets in order to push my emotional pain down. It is almost like choking myself so I won't speak. On the flip side, some people stop eating in order to calm themselves and feel a sense of control. I know that many of us here have been or are anorexic, or have a friend or family member who lives with this issue. I have a friend who likes to say that when she was nineteen she had to go to the hospital to learn how to eat, which is literally one of the major things she did during this hospitalization, learn how to eat again.

The really difficult thing is, as our member mentioned, that we do have to eat, multiple times a day. So what happens emotionally and physically when food, meant to sustain and nurture life, becomes either overused or underused in order to help bear the pain of life? This is tough stuff. And anyone struggling with food and disordered thoughts needs compassion. The primal healing cycle of food has been broken. This is a time for great compassion.

Many of us here are vegetarian or vegan (use of no animal products including butter and honey) for ethical or health reasons. Bill Ziegler wrote to me, "When the topic of food was announced as the focus for June 7, I took it as a goal to return to the vegan diet that I had formerly pursued. It was a deliberate act that is now bearing fruit; a smaller carbon footprint, less expense by healthier basic foods and a desire to eat seasonal fare."

The desire to eat seasonal fare also makes Bill a "locavore," someone who eat food that is found close to home. Some people also refer to this as "slow food." One of you

recommended the book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, by Barbara Kingsolver, which is about her families experience eating locally for one year, and how they were changed by knowing where their food came from and the people who grew and raised it. I have long been a fan of the home garden, stopping at farm stands, and buying a half cow from a local butcher (yes I am a carnivore). One thing I miss about moving away from Eastgate, is how easy it was for me to find a local farm stand.

You will not be surprised that Dick Bozian wrote me some interesting comments about food. Dick is a doctor and probably the healthiest and most active 95 year old I know (or have ever met). Dick wrote:

"There are ample studies showing that the Seventh Day Adventist Ovo-Lacto Vegetarian diet is protective for all of the degenerative diseases including Alzheimer's. If one is to follow a vegetarian diet they need to know their business to get adequate protein. . . Personally, I like the Mediterranean diet prevalent throughout the Middle East including Crete. The scientist Artemis Simopolous has described it in the book *The Omega Diet*. It is rich in fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes as well as Olive Oil. There are lesser quantities of meat with eggs, fish and dairy included. . . . No diet is perfect for everyone because of genetic susceptibilities such as Syndrome X with susceptibility to carbohydrates, gluten sensitivity, and even sensitivity to such complex carbohydrates as celery, cabbage, and carrots leading to irritable bowel symptoms."

I appreciate Dick's nuanced comments that "no diet is perfect for everyone." This is my fourth observation. He is absolutely correct. I have friends who were vegetarian but could not prevent anemia and had to return to animal proteins. Other friends did fine. My sister eliminated gluten because she has epilepsy and this is a possible trigger. My other sister has had significant digestive issues and eliminated sugar and gluten from her diet but then discovered she had to increase fat to stay healthy. My doctor recently looked at my blood chemistry and said "Get off sugar and gluten. You are prone to Type II diabetes." I took her seriously and now significantly limit both. And as you already heard me mention, we have a child at church who cannot ingest fish, shell fish, tree nuts, dairy, soy, and peanuts. This child is so allergic that if I just ate peanut butter and a small bit is left on my hand, and I then touched this child's arm, this child would break out in hives in less than a minute.

Fifth, the production of food is a time-consuming spiritual practice. Ann Retford wrote about growing up on a farm

"Most all of the food we ate was grown on the farm. Vegetables from the garden were canned or frozen to last through the winter. Pears from our trees and bushels of peaches and apples from nearby orchards were canned to be used for dessert. We had fresh fruits and vegetables only in season . . . Beef, pork, and chicken were used for meat. You can't get fresher chicken than 2 hours from chicken coop to table. My father, who grew up on a small farm like Ann, used to joke with me that he was the original locavore and organic farmer. Of course, the farm he grew up on, and I assume Ann's too, had several compost piles, and one big enough to even disintegrate animal bones.

Ann also shared a memory about growing a commercial garden of green beans one summer while she was in high school. She wrote "I spent the summer bent over picking. Beans grow

quickly and it was a task to keep ahead of them . . . I remember that time and have respect for the migrant workers that do much of the stoop labor to produce our food."

Lois Gish wrote to me "I am an avid gardener. I started at age 23 to prove to myself that I could garden like my mother did, and not be lazy like when I was growing up. From there I discovered it was a kind of therapy to dig in the earth. I love the magic of seeds, water, sunshine and a good thunderstorm to make things grow . . . I admit to frustration when we are short on rain and long on sunshine and excessive heat. I feel the pain of parched plants. We recycle rainwater in 250 gallon totes."

I found her comments on raising livestock particularly poignant, and I know my father felt this way about some of his "pet" cows, particularly one from his boyhood named "Henry" that used to run to the fence like a dog to greet people. Lois explains "I think about raising chickens for meat, but after looking them in the eye, it seems like a betrayal so I haven't done that yet."

I hope this sermon has encouraged you to be curious about food and how you and others produce and consume it. This is an essential spiritual experience. I hope you also slow down in your eating, because sustaining life is also a spiritual experience. Reflect on and savor it. Consider what you eat when, and enjoy it. Have compassion for yourself and others who struggle with negative food relationship. Have hope. Experiment with new foods. Enjoy food in company with others. Attune yourself to your personal body chemistry and what food makes you feel healthy and strong and what makes you feel unwell. If you eat meat, consider the source of your meat and how these animals are treated. Experiment with growing some of your own food. There is a vegan meal after services today for those who want to learn more, and I encourage you to learn more, especially if you are uncertain about veganism.

As Lois concluded "No matter what, it is always good to give thanks for what we have. I am so grateful to have a relationship with nature and the food that I grow. It is indeed a kind of therapy that puts life in perspective."