

“Feed More Souls”
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Tomorrow is Food Day, as you may or may not have heard – a day when we are encouraged to “eat real,” as the slogan goes. According to organizers, it will be a day when “thousands of Americans will gather in schools, college campuses, farmers markets, [restaurants], City Halls, and state capitals to talk about what's right and wrong with our diets and the whole food system and how to fix them.”

“Food Day’s goal is nothing less than to transform the American diet – to inspire a broad movement involving people from every corner of our land who want healthy, affordable food produced in a sustainable, humane way.”

Healthy...yes, so much of the food we eat – highly processed, filled with fat, sugar, and or salt – contributes to our ill health – to obesity, cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, cancer...

Humane...many of our standard industrial agricultural practices cause unnecessary pain and suffering to farm animals that give their lives that we might have meat, eggs, milk and cheese – and to labors who work in dangerous conditions...

Sustainable...many of our practices rob the soil of its health, pollute the land, the water and the air, and rely overly much on non-renewable petroleum products for their production and transportation...

And affordable...our food system, as it exists today, allows millions to go without food in a world where others have far more than they need, largely, although not entirely, because good, wholesome, nutritious food is either not available or affordable to all...

Those are some of the problems, briefly stated, which Food Day is intended to begin to address.

There are many, many sermons that one could preach related to these problems and to their solutions. They can’t all be preached today. Rather this morning, I’d like to begin by looking at these problems theologically. And then I’d like to focus on the issues related to affordability and availability of real food to those who need it.

Recently a friend of mine pointed me in the direction of a book that was new to me, a book called *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* by Norman Wirzba, who is a professor of theology, economy and rural life at Duke Divinity School.

Wirzba talks about food as something that is meant to join us together, intimately and intricately with other people, but also with the entire natural world. The very act of eating is, he says, an act

of communion, with all of life and with the mystery that is the source of that life. Or, as he says, with God and God's creation.

In order for us to live, we must eat. And in order for us to eat, we must take life. Life must give way to death in order for other life to be sustained. And that is an intimate process, which reminds us that we are in fact connected intricately with all life and with all that sustains life...the soil, the air, the water, the sun.

This year at our UU General Assembly, delegates passed a new Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating, which begins with this language:

“Aware of our interdependence, we acknowledge that eating ethically requires us to be mindful of the miracle of life we share with all beings.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we understand this idea of an interconnected web of all existence quite well. This is what Wirzba means when he talks about communion. Being part of something bigger and recognizing that we belong to it and that we are connected intimately and intricately to others.

According to Wirzba, the problem with our current food systems, in theological terms, is that “we live in exile, which [he] defines as ‘the refusal to welcome and accept responsibility for the membership of creation of which we are a part.’”

According to Kyle Childress, who reviewed *Food and Faith* for the publication *Christianity Today*, “exile is alienation and isolation from communion. Exilic eating is when we eat poorly, in a way that is fragmented from a healthy food chain, which results in our various eating disorders, including everything from obesity to industrial agriculture, destruction of the environment and degradation of our food.”

This is such an interesting idea to me that we are in living in exile when it comes to our food. We are cut off. We are alienated, isolated, separated. We don't see the connections between our food and our health, our food choices and the health of workers or the environment, our choices and the fact of hunger.

When I think of these things together...exile, food, hunger...I think also of the other ways we are alienated from our food. I think of the way we so often eat without being satisfied; the way we eat – often over-eat – to fill some emotional or spiritual void; the way we eat and run or eat alone; the ways in which we are disconnected from the actual experience of eating.

I think of how people – so many people – are hungry these days...for connection, for purpose, for wholeness, for health...and for good food itself.

For Wirzba and other Christians, the act of communion is one path out of that exile. For communion is a ritual of re-mem-bering, of restoring that which has been dis-membered, of recalling our connections not only to one another, but to our food and those who gave their labor and their lives that we might eat and live. When thought of in those terms, communion can be a

very relevant and powerful act that brings us back into community in the fullest sense of the word.

And what happens when we are brought back into community and we do see again the connections through which we are bound to another? Well, we might get upset when we see brokenness in that web, when we see injustice. And we might be moved to change how we are in the world to help fix that brokenness.

One of the goals of Food Day is to “expand access to food and alleviate hunger.” So, I’d like to look more closely at the issue of hunger this morning. And I’d like to look at it as a local issue.

According to Project Bread,

“The number of people in Massachusetts struggling to put healthy food on the table every day is reaching unthinkable numbers – nearly 660,000 people. This is a nearly 20 percent increase in one year.” It is also more people than live in the entire District of Columbia!

Hunger is a fairly invisible problem here in our state, however. The statewide poverty rate, which correlates with hunger, was 10.3% in 2009 and rose to 11.4% in 2010. That’s relatively low. The nationwide average in 2010 was 15.3%. Massachusetts is among the 10 states with the lowest rates of poverty. And yet,

“Massachusetts is [also] one of two states with the widest income gap in the nation. Because of high-income areas, statewide poverty numbers mask the real struggle that families face in lower-income communities.”

In Newton, for instance, the poverty rate is only 5.5%. But in Lawrence it is 30%. In Springfield, it is 27%. In Ayer, it is estimated to be close to 25%. In Clinton, well over 35%. By comparison, the state with the highest poverty rate in the nation is Mississippi, with a statewide poverty rate of 22.5%.

These numbers are getting higher because of the economic situation of the last few years. Parents in families that never before experienced food insecurity are increasingly finding it difficult to feed their children adequately. According to Project Bread again, one young couple...

“Kristin and John...lived for 12 years in a comfortable home in Framingham with their two children. In 2009, both Kristin and John lost their jobs over a four-month period. Facing foreclosure, they sold their house for what they owed on it. Now, living in a cramped apartment, Kristin’s unemployment benefits have run out, and her family is struggling to put food on the table.

Although Kristin wants to feed her children fresh fruits and vegetables, she cannot afford them. Her younger daughter has had ear infections all year and was just diagnosed with anemia – conditions associated with a chronically inadequate diet.””

Their situation is increasingly common. And so, I ask again, what happens when we are brought back into community and we see again the connections through which we are bound to another? We might get upset when we see brokenness. And we might be moved to change how we are in the world to help fix that brokenness.

In the Gospel of Luke it is written, “Blessed are you that hunger now...”

In the Gospel of Matthew it is written, “Blessed are you who hunger and thirst after righteousness...”

And in the Gospel of Thomas, it says, “Blessed are you who go hungry, so that the stomachs of the ones in want may be filled, for you are a blessing unto the world...”

In other words, the ones who have not are already blessed. The ones who are mad that some go without, are blessed. And those who actually do something about it, who sacrifice something in order that the have nots might also have, they are truly blessed.

I’m thinking of the kind man in our story this morning who had so little, just a small amount of rice, but who so generously reduced his own portion so that he could feed the hungry miser who had come to his door.

I’m thinking of the ways we, as individuals, are called, perhaps, to change our own habits of eating, our habits of consumption, in general, perhaps – so that others might eat, too. We could, for instance, eat more plant-based, less processed, more local, more sustainably grown foods in order to use fewer of the world’s resources to feed ourselves.

But I’m thinking also of the ways we are called as a community to fix the brokenness of the system in which we live and eat. We are doing many of those things already! And we are doing them well! A busload of us participate in Project Bread’s Walk for Hunger every May and raise thousands of dollars to help alleviate hunger in this state. Many more of us have written checks and made other donations to Loaves and Fishes.

A growing number of us have helped prepare and serve meals once a month for guests at the Community Café run by WHEAT in Clinton. The Board and I are scheduled to do that very thing together next month. And approximately 25% of our congregation has participated in one way or another in the outreach ministries coordinated by our Glean Team – gleaning food from farms and farmers markets, rescuing food from Roche Brothers that would otherwise be thrown away – and delivering all of that fresh produce to Loaves and Fishes, to WHEAT, and to Transitions every week.

Many of us are involved in these various ministries, but can’t get complacent and we need more help. We need more of us to be involved. The need is great and growing every month that the economy continues to flounder.

One of my colleagues this week was tweeting words of wisdom that he's picked up from a church conference on mission and outreach that he's been attending, and one of the many wonderful quotes that he tweeted has stuck with me. It said, "If you really get serious about loving your neighbor, you can make a measurable difference in your neighborhood."

Before I close, I want to share a story with you of how one of our sister congregations is making a measurable difference in its neighborhood.

In Groton, a number of local organizations, including the UU church, have banded together to hold monthly community dinners. It all began when a group of people in their town started asking questions: "What if we could feed hungry people? What if we could help lonely people feel more included? How can we start talking to one another and build a real community? How are we going to take care of each other?"

You see, they recognized that there are different kinds of hunger and they decided to try to address many of them at the same time. And so...

"On the last Friday of each month, a community gathers: the young, the old, families, single people, poor people, wealthy people – and everyone in between. There are no lines between who is hungry for food, who is hungry for community, who is hungry to serve, and who might be there for a bite of everything."

"People are being fed in literal terms with healthy, nutritious food that is sourced and served sustainably. People are being fed with music and conversation. People are being fed by serving others. People are being fed by being part of a tangible community."
(Miranda Hersey Helin, "Feeding a Community.")

"We talked about feeding people," [Groton resident, Brenna] Mayer says. "For people like us who love food and cooking, it's about expressing love through food. It seemed like a natural thing to do."

This is something I could imagine us doing here in Harvard.

Ours is a community that loves food. We like to cook together. We treasure our meals together. We miss the potlucks that we used to have once a month, the opportunity to get together with one another outside for worship for fellowship that is more lingering and intimate than coffee hour. We care about good food, real food, healthy food. We participate in cleanses, we sponsor movies and read books about food and farming, and we reflect on what it means to eat ethically.

We've already dedicated ourselves to the work of alleviating hunger, not only through the church programs I've already mentioned, but through our support of other organizations such as Growing Places Garden Project, Gaining Ground, and the Food Project.

And we have a beautiful, brand-spanking new Fellowship Building, which we have consistently said we want to offer as a resource to the community. What better way might there be?

Remember the miser who “used his gold to improve the lives of local people,” who “held feasts for his neighbors...which were so enjoyable that they became the talk of the land?”

Why don't we use our gold, our gifts, our green building to feed more souls?

Once upon a time, in another denomination, in another part of the country, member of a church were contemplating expanding their own outreach ministry to hungry people in their community – in their case a church-based food pantry. And many were resisting. They worried that more outreach would take away from their experience of church as a quiet, restful, sanctuary from the world outside, a place where they came to be restored and renewed. And a man named Lawrence stood up and said,

“I'm like other middle-class people,” [Lawrence] said, “and I hate being forced to deal with people who are not like me – people who are poor, crazy, who don't behave the way I do in public. They make me nervous. I feel a sense of conflict about this because, on the one hand, I know what the right thing to do is, yet I'm sometimes paralyzed when I try to do it. By the right thing, I mean opening myself to the experience of people who are not like me.

“But,” Laurence continued..., “I really want to serve food to the community. I want people who are too tired from a week of work and child rearing and the stress of living in the projects to take their family to lunch without having to cook and do the dishes. And after that, I want them to take a bag of groceries home – so their kids have something decent to eat in the morning before school I don't care if they ever join our church or not. I don't care if they worship with the Holy Rollers. I don't care if they are against gay marriage. I don't care what they think of me. I just want them to have a little break – to feel my love in what I sometimes think is the best, if not the only, way I know how to show it, with love in my heart and the smell of garlic on my hands. That's what the kingdom of God looks like to me.”¹

Love is the spirit of this church. And so may we continue to find new ways to share that spirit of Love with those outside of our walls. May we find new ways to feed more souls. And may we continue to be an ever-increasing blessing unto the world.

Amen and Blessed be.

¹ Miles, Sara, *Take This Bread*, New York: Ballantine, 2008, pp. 252-3.