

# Preaching the good news with our mouths full

Cathleen Hockman-Wert

**W**hen I was a child, I ate as a child—the consummate picky eater. I didn’t like strawberries. I didn’t like watermelon. I didn’t like corn on the cob or cucumbers or peppers or peaches.

Today, having put away such childish eating habits, I now consider myself—to my mother’s amusement—something of a

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food evangelist. I am neither a theologian nor a food professional of any kind, but a passionate advocate for eating good food. Evangelists tell the good news, and to me, choosing local, sustainably grown, and fairly traded food is all about good news. These are foods that not only taste good and are good for our health; they’re also good for the environment, good for local economies, good for our neighbors who farm, and good for people worldwide.

Going into all these areas is too much for one article, but I’d like to lay some ground-

work for thinking about food as a spiritual matter, and for considering the role food can play in our Christian walk. How can what goes into our mouths say something about our faith?

## **Food is a gift**

Food plays a central role in the Christian story and our theology, tradition, and practices. Scriptural examples abound. In Genesis 1, food is God’s very first gift, to humankind and animals alike.

When the Israelites wander in the wilderness, God provides a new gift of manna. Jesus’ first miracle turns water into wine, and later he feeds thousands with bread and fish. Even after the resurrection, there is the risen Christ, cooking breakfast on the shore.

It’s important to start by emphasizing that food is a gift from God, a fundamentally good and wonderful gift. This reminder is

especially important for those of us living in a culture of abundance. How fortunate many of us are to wake each morning untroubled by concerns about whether we and our loved ones will have enough nutritious food for the day. Yet how easy it can be to take food for granted, or even to see it in negative spiritual terms. Ever been “tempted” by a piece of “Chocolate Sin Cake”?

In *The Supper of the Lamb*, Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon sets the record straight:

*Food these days is often identified as the enemy. Butter, salt, sugar, eggs are all out to get you. And yet at our best we know better. Butter is ... well, butter: it glorifies almost everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfecter of all flavors. Eggs are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And if you put them all together, you get not sudden death, but Hollandaise—which in its own way is not one bit less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip, or a Bach fugue.<sup>1</sup>*

Imagine a perfectly ripe peach, a delight to every sense: that soft, fuzzy skin, rosy blush, sweet perfume, squelch of the first slurpy bite, then juice dripping down your chin. A wondrous thing! I have to conclude: God cares, really cares, about food.

Food is sacred. For Christians, food is, literally, a sacrament: the Eucharistic elements. And the Lord's Supper is the best illustration that when we're talking about food, the line between metaphor and the literal gets fuzzy. When we celebrate communion, real bread and drink are involved, but something much deeper is going on than the nourishment of our bodies, as essential as that is. Episcopal bishop Bill Swing puts it this way: “There's a hunger beyond food that's expressed in food, and that's why feeding is always a kind of miracle. It speaks to a bigger desire.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Food is a moral issue**

Just as some foods are physically more nourishing than others, some are spiritually more nourishing than others—or they can be. We won't find this on any label (4 g. fiber, 1 g. fat, 50 percent daily recommended food for the soul), and we don't always think about it. But the foods we eat are not morally neutral. All foods

come with stories, stories of real-world impact. Some of those stories are much more in tune with our values.

Consider an example from the early nineteenth century, as described by Jessica Prentice in *Full Moon Feast*. New England settlers of the day could choose between two sweeteners: locally produced maple sugar or refined cane sugar imported from the Caribbean, where it was produced by slaves. An 1805 farmer's almanac urged, "Make your own sugar, and send not to the Indies for it. Feast not on the toil, pain, and misery of the wretched." A historian of Vermont noted that maple sugar "is never tinctured

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with the sweat, and the groans, and the tears, and the blood of the poor slave."<sup>3</sup>

That's a 200-year-old story. The point is that stories of our food today also have dramatic ethical implications. Yet because so few of us produce our own food, we no longer know those stories.

Where did your last meal come from? If we were to read the full story, we might start with several chapters explaining where our food was grown, by whom, under what

conditions, with what consequences for wildlife, and for whose profit. Of concern would be the seeds' origin, the planting, watering, fertilizing, weeding, spraying, and harvesting. The next chapters would go into the transporting, storing, packaging, processing, and marketing of our food.

By the time we got to the end, we would see how our food choices are affecting creation and our neighbors, making them healthy or sick, making lives better or worse. We would find that although one carrot can look pretty much like another, one pound of hamburger like another, their stories can be as different as the tale of two sweeteners in 1805 New England. Some have happy endings. Others are horror stories.

In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, journalist Michael Pollan offers an in-depth but very readable account of the conventional agriculture system in the United States and its impact on the environment. He describes the central role fossil fuels play in the industrial food chain: from chemical fertilizers to providing the energy needed to run farm machinery and to process, package,

and transport food. All told, it takes ten times more energy to produce the food than the food itself provides the eater.

Pollan makes a direct connection between food choices and international conflict. The context is a chapter about conventional meat production. Rather than eating grass and converting the energy of the sun into a food that people can digest, most modern cows in the U.S. eat grain. The statistic I have seen elsewhere is that it takes about a cup of gasoline to produce a quarter-pound burger. As a result, Pollan says, “petroleum is one of the most important ingredients in the production of modern meat, and the Persian Gulf is surely a link in the food chain....

[The industrial food chain is] powered by fossil fuel—and therefore defended by the U.S. military, another never-counted cost of cheap food.”<sup>4</sup>

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I daresay when most of us buy a hamburger, we're thinking about whether we want fries with it, not about the war in Iraq. Our food production chain has become so long and complex that we don't see the effects of our choices. But to say that we don't know the stories of our food is not to say that we do not participate in those stories. As writer and farmer Wendell Berry famously put it, eating is an agricultural act. And a moral one. And

that is precisely why I get so energized by this topic. Our Anabaptist tradition emphasizes discipleship: a concern for how we live out our faith in ordinary life. The constant nature of our need to eat provides a tremendous opportunity to express our faith every day.

Given the ramifications of the choices we make about food, it's possible that what we put in our mouths can be as powerful a faith statement as the words coming out of our mouths. St. Francis is quoted as saying, “Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words.” Now we can preach the good news with our mouths full!

### **Food is a gift for everyone**

Every faith tradition includes a call to share food and be hospitable. Working to ensure that all people have access to good food—food that is good in every way—is a relevant and even

prophetic way for Christians to extend our historical efforts to feed the hungry.

The exponential growth of the fair trade coffee industry over the last decade has shown that churches can make an enormous difference. Fair trade coffee has entered the mainstream with incredible speed, and at least some of the credit belongs to organizations such as Ten Thousand Villages that sell it, and to churches that buy it and promote it among their members.

**What I love most about this journey with food and faith is its ordinariness. We all eat. Not everyone can buy a hybrid car, but we all can make small, mindful choices about what we eat.**

In my own community of Corvallis, Oregon, it's been exciting to be a part of a local initiative called "That's My Farmer." For the 2007 growing season, ten churches teamed up with ten small farms to sell coupons redeemable for fresh, local food at the farmers' market. A

ten percent "tithe" from each booklet went into a fund to provide free coupons to low-income people in the community. That's a win-win-win: church members who bought the coupons got great food, local farmers got more business, and lower-income folks got better access to fresh, nutritious food.

### **Eating is a spiritual discipline**

Participating in That's My Farmer has convinced me that eating can be a meaningful spiritual discipline. I use this term for two main reasons. First, as with the discipline of charitable giving, there's an economic impact: good foods can cost more. I have needed to learn to question my "cheaper is always better" attitude. While I still value frugality, I no longer assume that price is the most important factor as I make a purchasing decision. Now I ask about any item, not just food: Why is this item cheap? What costs, in terms of impact on the environment and other people's lives, are not being covered? Who is bearing the real costs?

Keeping these questions in mind helps me remember that my purchase happens in the context of a community, human and nonhuman. My choices aren't just about me and my pocketbook. As I shop, I have learned to repeat a prayer from *Blessed Be Our Table*, a collection of graces from the Iona community: "Let me not seek a bargain that leaves others hungry."<sup>5</sup>

Just as significant as the economic impact is the impact on time. My observation from *That's My Farmer* is that for the majority of our congregation, time was a bigger barrier to participation than cost was. Amid busy schedules, it can be hard to find the time to buy and prepare fresh food. Framing this practice as a spiritual discipline honors that reality. If we are to spend time in worship or prayer, we must make these practices a priority. The same is true of cooking a meal.

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Not everyone can manage to buy a hybrid car or go off the electrical grid, but we all can make small, mindful choices about what we eat. We might make one choice today and a different choice tomorrow, but the next meal always brings another chance to move toward greater consistency in matching our values with our actions.

That, to me, is how grocery shopping can be a spiritual act. It's about putting my faith into practice. I mean *practice* in the sense of "enactment" but also in the sense of "to train by repeated exercises." It's like practicing the

piano. We do it over and over again and get better. It's not about perfection.

Practicing the spiritual discipline of mindful eating can be a way to practice—and perhaps get better at—hope. When I consider the scope of global environmental degradation and the looming specter of climate change, any action I might take can seem meaningless. What can one person do? I am tempted to sink into despair or apathy. Yet as I eat, I can take concrete actions each day and offer them up as acts of faithfulness, more focused on responding to our Creator than on results.

I have read that we Mennonites, for all our humility, are particularly susceptible to the sin of pride; our emphasis on discipleship twists into an unrelenting internal sense that it's up to us to fix the world. In truth, fixing the world is God's business. Yes, we can participate in that great mending, but our actions are on the scale of the child who brought his lunch to Jesus. We can

offer them up, trusting that God can use them to work wonders beyond our imagining.

As we eat good food, we are nourished, physically and spiritually, for the journey. Isaiah 55 rings out like a dinner bell: Come, and eat what is good.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> As cited by Sara Miles, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Prentice, *Full Moon Feast: Food and the Hunger for Connection* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Pub., 2006), 26–27.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Neil Paynter, *Blessed Be Our Table: Graces for Mealtimes and Reflections on Food* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2003), 26.

## About the author

Cathleen Hockman-Wert, Corvallis, Oregon, is the co-author, with Mary Beth Lind, of *Simply in Season*, a cookbook in the spirit of *More-with-Less*, commissioned by Mennonite Central Committee.