

Our Daily Bread
Ezekiel 47:9-12; John 21:1-14
April 22, 2007

A visitor was admiring a farmer's vast expanse of land, with the extensive irrigation system and long rows of crops. The visitor complimented the farmer. "You've done a fine job of cultivating the Lord's land." The farmer replied, "Yeah, you should've seen it when the Lord was managing it by himself."

That story is often told in the context of stewardship to illustrate how human labor is necessary to partner with God in order to complete creation. But oftentimes we humans abuse the land God has entrusted to our care. Sometimes our cultivation of the land has done violence to it and been harmful to God's creation. How the land is farmed impacts air, water, soil, animals and people. Agriculture is inextricably linked to the health and well-being of all God's creation – human and nonhuman.

Some of you grew up on family farms and many remember when family farms provided most of the food on our tables. Family farms were a central part of the social fabric and economic livelihood of rural communities. Family farmers often work their land with an eye toward long-term sustainability, both economic and environmental. Small and mid-sized family farms also support a strong and stable local economy.

Today across rural America small and mid-sized family farms are being replaced by large-scale farms that aim to produce the greatest output at the lowest cost by using economies of scale. They grow large amounts of one thing. In part this "industrial" agriculture is driven by consumer demand for abundant, cheap food. Unfortunately, in meeting this immediate economic demand, the long-term sustainability of the environment is often overlooked. Large-scale farming has edged out smaller farms and agribusinesses now control most of the food production in our country. The wheat, eggs, milk, and butter that make our daily bread rarely come from local family farms anymore.

Family farmers are feeling the effects of this trend. In 2002, family farmers earned their lowest net real cash income since 1940. Many family farmers are forced to work *off* the land away from the farm in order to make ends meet. Farm workers, often underpaid for their work, are exposed to harmful farm chemicals and hazardous working conditions. While we now enjoy having any food we want any time we want, the industrial agricultural model is causing harm to the Lord's land and to human communities around the world and close to home.

In addition to the impact on family farms, our modern food system has an impact on the environment. U.S. farm policy limits commodity payments to certain crops, leading to the overproduction of those crops, which can damage the soil ecosystem. Industrial agriculture uses high volumes of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Not only do these chemicals end up in our food, but also in streams, rivers, and groundwater. Animal wastes from industrial livestock feeding operations contaminate water. Seventeen percent of fossil fuels in the U.S. are consumed by our food production system through farm machinery, food processing and packaging, refrigerating and transporting of food. On average, food travels at least 1,500 miles from the farm to our dinner table.¹ These are some of the ways in which our industrial food system is impacting the rest of the ecosystem.

In her book, *Harvest for Hope*, Jane Goodall tells the journey of a packet of refined white sugar added to coffee. First the sugarcane is grown and processed in Hawaii. But because it is still in the pale brown raw stage, it is shipped to the C&H (California & Hawaii) Refinery near San Francisco, turning it into snow-white fine-grain sugar. In order to be packaged into little sealed paper packets for coffee shops, it is transported across the U.S. to New York. Eventually it is distributed to restaurants across the nation, including coffee shops in Hawaii across the street from the original processing plant. Ultimately, that package of sugar makes a 10,000 mile round-trip processing journey before ending up in a coffee mug back in Hawaii.²

Native Americans remind us that we are all connected in the web of life. Anything we do has an impact on other areas of creation. A farmer in Illinois has a dolphin shaped weather vane on top of his barn. Visitors wonder what a dolphin has to do with his farm hundreds of miles from the ocean. He says, “It is a good reminder that we are all connected. Farms in the Midwest export so much soil and chemical fertilizer downstream to the Mississippi and out into the Gulf of Mexico that we’ve created a dead zone the size of Massachusetts that threatens all sea life. Our organic farm creates healthy soils that keep soil and fertility on the farm and out of the sea where the dolphins swim.”

Christians are called to care for God’s creation. Biblical stories point us toward God’s vision for justice. The prophet Ezekiel envisions the restoration of the land of Israel following the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. A river of fresh water flows from the throne of God. The salty water of the Dead Sea is transformed into a freshwater sea of life. Fish will thrive in the sea and all kinds of trees will grow on the banks of the

river. The fresh fruit of the trees is for food and their leaves have medicinal value for healing. It is a vision of the sea and land restored to life for its own intrinsic value and for the well-being of others. God desires the wholeness of all creation.

In our Gospel reading this morning we see Jesus' support of the community fishing business of his disciples. After a night of fruitless labor on the sea, he sends them back out to find a miraculous catch of fish.

Some family farmers are offering alternatives to the industrialized food production system. Joel Salatin runs Polyface Farm in central Virginia. He says that "his Christian faith informs the way he raises and slaughters the animals on his 500-acre farm. He sees it as his responsibility to honor the animals as creatures that reflect God's creative and abiding love."³ His website says, "We are in the redemption business: healing the land, healing the food, healing the economy, and healing the culture."⁴

His method of food production is designed to honor God's work. He pays attention to the patterns of symbiotic life, noting how different species live best with each other, and making use of those patterns rather than imposing on creation an industrial or market-efficiency model. He notes how the grasses and animals live in a complex dance of interdependence.

Joel's "salad bar beef" eat fresh grass everyday by moving to a new pasture using portable fencing. Chickens often follow behind the cows, which have naturally mown the grass, allowing the hens to eat tender, fresh sprouts. In this way "chickens and cows are free to do what they do best—eat grass and roam for bugs and larvae—while stimulating optimum grass growth. The pasture will produce an excellent hay crop for winter feed or be ready for a new rotation."

"This system honors the creatures by enabling them to live the way God intended them to live." The cattle eat grass, not corn. They are free to roam, not confined, thereby making antibiotics unnecessary and disease rare.

Nor do the fields require the synthetic fertilizers and the toxic pesticides that other farmers routinely use. "They are fertilized and kept relatively pest-free by the activity of the animals feeding upon them."⁵

By allowing the fields and animals to play off each other's strengths, the creatures enter into a dance in harmony with the activity of one another. In this way they bring praise and thanksgiving to God.

Many innovative movements are underway to help us reclaim the gift of daily bread that we all consume. One of them started a few miles from us in Berkeley, where Alice Waters created the Edible Schoolyard. She converted an asphalt parking lot next to Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School into a fertile garden cultivated by students. Their crops of argula,

asparagus, kiwi, artichokes, red Russian kale, grapes, pumpkins, herbs, and flowers are cleaned and prepared by the students in a kitchen, where they cook meals for themselves and other students. They are not only learning about sustainable ecosystems, but also learning the arts of manners and civil conversation at the meal table.⁶

We need not be farmers or restaurateurs in order to make a difference. In our state we are blessed by many locally grown foods. We can buy fresh, seasonal foods from local farm stands, farmer's markets and Community Supported Agriculture (www.localharvest.org). Some local farms have a community of supporters who commit to covering a farm's yearly operating budget by purchasing a share of the season's harvest. Community members assume the costs, risks, and bounty of growing food along with the farmer. Members help pay for seeds, fertilizer, water, equipment maintenance, and labor. In return, the farm provides a healthy supply of seasonal fresh produce throughout the growing season. This mutually supportive relationship between local farmers, growers, and community members helps create an economically stable farm operation. Members are assured high quality produce, often at below retail prices. Farmers and growers are guaranteed a reliable market for a diverse selection of crops.⁷

The program in our area is called Eat Outside the Box; there is a pick-up location here in Lafayette.

Even our attitude while eating meals can create a difference in how we view the land and its fruits. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes of the Buddhist path of mindful consumption. He encourages us to look deeply into the nature of what we consume every day. It is important to provide people with items that are nourishing and healing. The past week of violence in our nation prompts us to be mindful of all that we consume, not simply the food we eat, but also the information and sensory input we consume.

Thich Nhat Hanh encourages us to consider how each bite of food contains the life of the sun and the earth. We can see and taste the whole universe in a piece of bread! He chews a piece of food at least thirty times before swallowing, savoring the taste and texture, as well as aiding in the digestive process. When he holds a bowl of rice or a piece of bread, he recognizes how fortunate he is and feels compassion for all who have no food to eat and are without friends and family.

He suggests five contemplations to consider while eating.

- ◆ This food is the gift of the whole universe – the earth, the sky, and much hard work.
- ◆ May we eat in mindfulness so as to be worthy to receive it.

- ◆ May we transform our unskillful states of mind and learn to eat in moderation.
- ◆ May we take only foods that nourish us and prevent illness.
- ◆ We accept this food so that we may realize the path of understanding and love.⁸

As we consume our daily bread, may we be mindful: mindful of the soil which gave birth to the seed, the water and sun which nurtured it, the blessings of the animals who contributed dairy and eggs, the farmers who guided the process, the bakers who mixed the ingredients, those who hunger for a slice of daily bread, and our God, who blesses us all with life. Amen.

¹ “Our Daily Bread: Harvesters of Hope and Gardeners of Eden,” National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program, www.ncccojustice.org.

² Jane Goodall, *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating* (New York: Warner Books, 2005), p. 158.

³ Norman Wirzba, “Barnyard dance: Farming that honors animals,” *Christian Century*, January 23, 2007, p.8.

⁴ www.polyfacefarms.com. Retrieved April 21, 2007.

⁵ Wirzba, *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ Jane Goodall, *ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

⁷ www.localharvest.org. Retrieved April 20, 2007.

⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, quoted on www.slowmovement.com/forum. Retrieved April 19, 2007.

Rev. Lori Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA