

Food Wars: Episode One

The Phantom Lettuce

Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie
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So what does food have to do with Star Wars? And how is this Episode One?

Episode One of Star Wars is called *The Phantom Menace*, and so I have named this first installment of my food sermon series *The Phantom Lettuce*.

As your Associate Minister, I will always have both the pleasure and honor of preaching the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Knowing how much Neighborhood Church loves food, I thought, why not *always* preach on some aspect of food the Sunday after Thanksgiving? Perhaps next year's Episode Two will be titled not *Attack of the Clones*, but *Attack of the GMO's*.

It is an especially appropriate topic for a sermon series since Ethical Eating has just become the new Congregational Study / Action Issue of our UU Association of Congregations last summer. An efficient Study/Action Issue, Ethical Eating tackles two ills at once: social inequality and environmental destruction. In your order of service, you'll see the web address for a marvelous resource guide that is designed to get the whole process started for a bustling congregation such as our own. Take a peek when you get home.

For the next 3 or 4 years, UU churches and districts across the country are invited to study the matter of Ethical Eating in all its dimensions, by whatever means they see fit. Year by year, successful practices are submitted by individual congregations, in the areas of education, community organizing, advocacy, and public witness. Among the results will be a compendium of gleaned information that will be a valuable resource for all.

An annual sermon is a good place to start. But it's only a start.

This year, I've chosen to look at the issue of eating locally. You might have heard about the 'locavore' movement – people who make every effort to eat foods produced local to where they live. Before I get down to business, though, let me answer a lingering question: Does food and eating really merit the comparison to Star Wars, or the age-old question of good vs. evil? I think it does.

The way we eat is a reflection of who we are. We are what we eat, and food is as interconnected with the health of the natural environment as any other consumer choice. This is not an easy reckoning – admitting to how much we have been taking for granted. Sure, most of us can live without an SUV. But can we live without fresh tomatoes in winter, because their off-season production is too energy-intensive? Can we live part of the year without lettuce? Is the menace of the phantom lettuce real, or an illusion?

The degree of importance to which we attach all the things our lettuce can buy, is most definitely an illusion. The menace to society that consumerism has become is a very real part of our lives, and the difficult truth is that we now know that American-style consumerism threatens life on Earth as we know it. Like the evil Sith in Star Wars, it is a universal threat to all life. The senseless greed and illusion of need for consumer goods has hit a fever pitch. When a worker of a Wal-Mart store is trampled to death by a Black Friday morning mob, as happened a few days ago on Long Island, we know something is terribly wrong - something evil.

To consume is to be human, however - to eat good food is one of the best joys in life; we'll never stop buying and consuming things; there is nothing wrong with enjoying worldly things (within healthy limits), and obviously we'll never stop eating. The good news is that, with enlightened consuming, we can actually *live better lives*. Through the effort of awareness, we can co-operate with good more often than with evil.

Consumerism is the spiritual issue of our time; everyday it asks us to discern good from evil. And like the Star Wars series, it's not always so clear who the good guys and bad guys are in your local supermarket.

So without further adieu, let us begin this enterprise of discernment.

We shall begin with a disheartening, and yet also hopeful and empowering, factoid: the carbon footprint choices of eating is identical to the carbon footprint choices of driving. Two researchers of the University of Chicago note that, "With cars, the Toyota Prius, a gas-electric hybrid, uses scarcely one fourth as much fuel as a Chevrolet suburban SUV. Similarly with diets, a plant-based diet requires roughly one fourth as much energy as a diet rich in red meat. Shifting from a diet rich in red meat to a plant-based diet cuts green-house gas emissions as much as shifting from a Suburban SUV to a Prius."¹

I say it's disheartening because people really like meat, including me. But what is hopeful and empowering is that the alternatives don't have to be extreme. Let's say you are at the four-fourths rich-in-red-meat diet, or what Alisa Smith and J.B. Mackinnon of the 100-Mile Diet have dubbed 'the SUV diet.' While it would be noble, you don't have to move straight to the one-fourth veggie diet. Just moving to a three-fourths or half-diet makes a difference, especially if more and more of us are doing so. It's cheaper than buying a Prius.

I have moved to a half-diet. While I truly adore steak, and juicy cheeseburgers for that matter, I have reserved it to a quarterly, if that, event. I will eat any food people put in front of me if I am a guest, especially when traveling. But my everyday diet has become mostly vegetarian, with a goodly amount of yogurt, cheese, eggs, and fish for protein. When I miss having more meat in my diet I remind myself that it's a good spiritual practice to limit my diet. Why should I be entitled to eat whatever I want, when it hurts the environment? Humility comes in handy.

I like serving Neighborhood Church, and so I would never suggest you give up meat entirely, because I don't want to be run out of town. Thankfully there are less threatening ways to make a big difference in your diet. With enough research and habit-changing, eating more local foods could be one of them.

The concept is so new, that the many articles and books I read in preparation for this sermon have conflicting conclusions. The most compelling argument for local eating has to do with the culture of buying food. Everyone seems to agree that local Farmers' Markets are a good thing.

How many people here today, visited a Farmers' Market yesterday? Raise your hands. Those of you who did not raise your hands, you might check the website also listed in your Order of Service for where to find your nearest Farmers' Market. As some people have said, 'local is the new organic'; over the last decade, the number of Farmers' Markets in the US has grown from about 1750 to 3700.²

My husband Kit and I rode our bikes to the Silver Lake market yesterday, a five-minute ride for us. We bought locally-produced, pesticide-free strawberries, grapes, red chard, corn, mint, beets, spinach, green onions, asparagus, and a cucumber. We also bought olives, goat cheese, and indulged in some Idaho Ruby Trout. While not all of the produce was in season, it was cheap; the pitted Kalmata olives, cheese, and fish - not so much. We are excited about the food we will be eating this week.

Southern and mid-California are actually some of the few places on Earth where being a 'locavore' would be fairly easy – we truly are the envy of locavores worldwide. While taste, nutrition, and cost might be solid reasons for being a locavore, the best reason of all might be to participate in a healthy farming culture that is seeing a resurgence world-wide.

Some historical facts: The US has lost two-thirds of its farms since 1920. Some of these losses are painfully specific; while nearly a million African-Americans operated farms before the Depression, just

¹ Gidon Eshel and Pamela A. Martin are the Chicago researchers referenced by Lester R. Brown in Plan B 3.0, 2008, Norton, p. 189.

² From Yes! magazine, the 2007 Winter issue: "Food to Stay," by Gary Nabhan.

19,000 do today.³ There are now only 1.2 million people whose primary occupation is operating a farm, making the U.S. a nation with more people in prison than in full-time farming.

Iowa once had a diversified agricultural base that supported thriving rural communities. In 1920, ten different commodities, including fruit and vegetables, were produced on more than half of Iowa's farms. But by 1997, that had fallen to two: corn and soybeans.⁴

In the book *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*, authors Peter Singer and Jim Mason cite Verlyn Klinkenborg, who grew up on an Iowa farm and writes on rural life for *The New York Times*. When he looks back on the Iowa of his boyhood, Klinkenborg finds it difficult to imagine anywhere better to have been a child. "But that idyllic place has been destroyed, he writes, by 'the state's wholehearted, uncritical embrace of industrial agriculture . . .'" Klinkenborg's solution is to 'try to reimagine the nature of farming.'⁵

Singer and Mason go on to suggest that one way of reimagining farming is to bring together the people who grow the food and the people who eat it. "When that happens, the farmers get to keep almost all of the dollars the consumers spend on food, instead of the roughly 20% - and falling - they otherwise receive. Manufacturers, processors, advertisers, and retailers normally get all the rest." Transforming this situation could revitalize rural communities. "Many farmers feel an irreparable loss at being unable to hold on to the family farm, a loss so deep it can lead to despair and even suicide. One survey has shown that five times as many U.S. farmers commit suicide as die from farm accidents."⁶

Some argue that, like it or not, we live in a globalized economy, and it's sometimes more important to support the farmers in developing nations who are poorer - especially through Fair Trade practices. At the same time it's true that we've ignored how poor and desperate many of our own citizens have become, especially on the fringes. Anyway, you can't go to a Farmers' Market in Chile every week.

Another notable author of the local food movement, Gary Nabhan, has an article in the Winter 2007 issue of Yes! magazine that inspires us to err on the side of locality. He describes the wonderful results of a significantly revitalized farmers' market culture in Arizona. There was an 8 fold increase in local food sales in just four years, as well as more foot traffic for local retailers on market days, and over a dozen new youth gardens in Flagstaff and Hopi and Navajo reservations, just to name a few of the good changes to the culture and economy.

It seems to me that the writing on the wall is that agriculture needs to be increasingly localized everywhere, around the world, even if it means the phantom lettuce strikes again because it disappears in winter. It doesn't make sense that so many places import as much food for local consumption as they produce locally for export. Yes, it may seem like a reduction of the variety of foods available year-round. But like the creators of the 100-mile diet noted in the first reading, paradoxically, the result of a global food system has been a mass *under*-utilization of all the things people could grow for themselves all over the world. The system we have now seems kind of insane, not to mention unsustainable.

Despite eating more than ever before, our culture may be the only one in human history to value food so little.⁷ Most of us have no idea that the food we eat now typically travels between 1,500 and 3,000 miles from farm to plate, let alone *where* the food was grown. We have no connection to the natural processes of its production. The absurd abundance that cripples our appreciation is coupled with the depressing method of acquisition. There was a United Kingdom study that showed the amount of time people now spend driving to the supermarket, looking for parking, and wandering the lengthy aisles in search of frozen pizza or pre-mixed salads is nearly equal to that spent preparing food from scratch twenty years ago.⁸

³ Smith & Mackinnon, p. 56.

⁴ *The Ethics of What We Eat* by Peter Singer & Jim Mason, 2006, Rodale, pp. 142-3.

⁵ Same.

⁶ Same.

⁷ Smith & Mackinnon, p. 160.

⁸ Same, p. 159.

Even so, there is a complicated set of factors that speak for and against local eating. For example, Singer and Mason write this: "To say that buying local food will reduce energy usage and hence carbon-dioxide emissions is, at best, an oversimplification."⁹ It's true that carbon-reduction is a murky part of local eating. For instance, at this time it is more energy efficient to buy the wintertime conventional tomatoes grown in Florida at the supermarket, than it is to buy the hot-house, local, organic tomatoes at an alternative market. I for one am not quite ready to give up tomatoes in winter.

The least murky aspect of eating locally has to do with our re-humanization – this kind of healing has an undeniably positive, reverberating effect into many aspects of our culture.

Ideally, we minimize the de-humanizing effects of food-production to all involved: to the environment, the animals, farm-owners, workers, and consumers. It is a no-brainer that the consumer has become corrupted in a process where all the steps that precede consumption are corrupted by savage capitalism. In other words, we have lost reasonable restraint when it comes to mass-production and the corresponding mass-consumption. We are not only the food that we eat, we are also the whole string of events that brings that food to our tables.

It may be that we never possessed reasonable restraint to begin with. Until the true cost to the environment of all fossil fuel energy that goes into food is taken into account, reason remains out of reach.

Meanwhile there are seeds of hope and empowerment that we may plant right now. Making a point to eat more locally is integral to our over-all need to re-humanize and re-connect with nature, to transform our eating culture. The simplest way to begin is to start buying local produce on a more regular basis from a Farmers' Market. Talk to the farmers when you go, see where the food's from. Talk to the other customers while you're there, the people of your community. A study has shown that people have ten times as many conversations at farmers' markets as they do in supermarkets.¹⁰

When it comes down to the variables of local eating, the precise benefits are harder to grasp. Whether something is organic or in season, whether it tastes better, is healthier, more ethical, more environmentally friendly, or less pricey will vary from food to food. Don't throw your hands up in exasperation, and conclude that what you do will make no difference. Every little change in your life-style makes a difference. Remember these food wars are about constantly discerning good and evil. It is well worth going the extra mile of research that may lead to something significant. One positive thing leads to many more positive things.

Let us show up for change, let *show up for change*, one moment in your life at a time. It's amazing that showing up for change can be as simple as showing up at a Farmers' Market.

Let us keep close to our minds and hearts the Greek aphorism that Davidson referred to in his Thanksgiving Homily.

Plant a thought, reap an action;

Plant an action, reap a habit;

Plant a habit, reap a character;

Plant a character, reap a destiny.

Let's get our hands dirty, and let's rise in body or in spirit for our last hymn, # 317, We Are Not Our Own.

⁹ Singer & Mason, p. 149.

¹⁰ Same, p. 138.