
Vegans are right. Get over it!
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 1:26-31 and Mark 7:14:23

So today we celebrate World Food Sunday. Now after this service, we will truly celebrate by sharing food together. And I sincerely hope that some of you came today particularly because we have food after our service. But - be honest - other than *that* celebration - how else do you expect to be fed on “World Food Sunday”? Are you expecting a boring totally politically correct completely predictable sermon that is about how we need to learn to share? Sometimes, “special” Sundays can be very boring. But, World Food Sunday should not be boring.

But let me start with a pop quiz, since you seemed to like the pop quiz around communion. The question is, “Does Christianity have any rules about what we should eat?”

[descend and discuss]

Basically, no. Some Catholics don’t eat fish on Fridays, and many people choose to give up a particular food for lent, but there are no general rules for Protestant Christians. We have no blanket prohibitions, like other religions groups do - e.g. that Muslims do not eat pork. Notice in Genesis 1, however, that we are told that we have been given only fruits and vegetables to eat.

How many of us read the *United Church Observer*? Do you know that the Observer was started in 1829, with Egerton Ryerson as the editor? That was in Methodist days of course, and it was called *The Christian Guardian*. So the Observer is the oldest continuously published magazine in North America. And the Observer monitors how people respond to their articles. The strongest responses that the Observer received over those 189 years were during the 1980’s when the UCC was discussing human sexuality. But do you know what topic generated the 2nd strongest response? Food! How is that possible? Simple. The topic that generated all the heat was connecting the word “food”

with the word “health”.

When I just said the word “health”, you probably immediately thought of human health, or perhaps in particular your own health. That’s very natural. What connections do you see between human health and food? Well, globally, 25,000 people die every day from lack of food. Approximately 1 billion people are malnourished today. That’s a very direct connection between health and food. But on the other end of the spectrum, an estimated 2 billion people are overweight. In North America, our dwindling health is strongly related to how our eating patterns have changed. This started in the 1950’s with drive-ins, supermarkets, and the invention of convenience foods. By the 1960’s, heart disease was on the rise. And this year, 500,000 Americans will get bypass surgery, at a cost of approximately \$100k each for a total cost of \$50B.

Research now strongly indicates that what we eat is a huge factor here. In 1958, the US had 14,000 deaths from prostate cancer, while Japan (with half the population) had 18. Not 18,000, but 18 deaths. This is one of many examples that got the medical community interested in the relationships between diet, nutrition, human health. This has led to decades of research across the globe which I won’t even attempt to summarize. Besides, the idea that health and diet are related is not new. Hippocrates, writing around 400 BC, famously said, “Let food be your medicine”. And there is an ancient Chinese proverb that says, “If you take your medicine and neglect your diet, you are wasting your doctor’s time”.

But the answers are in, and study after study now show that when other food sources are available - as they are in North America - then eating meat, dairy, and eggs is unhealthy. Not only does our normal diet contribute to early death, but also reduced quality of life due to heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and other conditions. And what about the malnourished people? I quote from Howard Lyman, a former cattle rancher, “The fact of it is that we could feed every human being on the planet today an adequate diet if we did no more than take the feed that we are feeding to animals and actually turn it into food for humans.”

So current research says that for the health of all humans, we should become vegan. And now that I’ve used the “V” word - Vegan - I will share that the Observer

article was about food and health yes, but it focused on veganism. The title of the article if you'd like to read it was "Are vegans right?" The pre-publication title was actually "Vegans are right. Get over it." But the editorial board decided that was too provocative, even for the United Church.

Well, that's depressing, isn't it? I don't want to stop eating meat, dairy, and eggs. I mean, who wants to be "vegan"? Yuch.

So let's change the subject and talk about a different aspect of health. Let's consider the health of our planet. How about climate change? We already fixed that, right? Al Gore with his movie "An Inconvenient Truth" already scared us into buying more fuel efficient cars, changing our shower heads, and all that, right? Well, not really. For one thing, although - yes - we are driving more fuel efficient cars, there are globally many more cars on the road in total. The atmosphere doesn't care about emissions per car, only the total. And that total continues to climb. And then there is a very inconvenient UN report that says that raising livestock produces more emissions than the entire transportation sector anyway.

Depending on what you are measuring - water use, fossil fuel consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, land use, etc, the typical North American diet is 10-100 times worse for the planet than a vegan diet. As one example, it takes 18 times as much land to produce food for a typical diet compared to a vegan diet. And beyond climate change, livestock is responsible for many aspects of environmental degradation, including the destruction of rain forests at the current rate of 1 acre per second.

Even worse, not all greenhouse gasses are the same. Methane (which comes from livestock) is 86 times worse (per molecule) than Carbon Dioxide (that comes out of our cars). Not only is Methane much worse than CO₂, but if we stopped generating CO₂ today, it would take over 100 years for atmospheric CO₂ to recover, but if we stopped producing methane, the atmospheric methane would recover in about 10 years.

If this is news to you, it's not your fault. Just go to any environmental website and look for their suggestions on how you can "save the planet". On the vast majority of sites - including our Canadian Governmental sites - the focus is on buying new items to reduce CO₂ emissions. Methane and livestock do not usually even get on the home page.

So Methane is a larger problem than CO2, and it can also be fixed more rapidly. But we only talk about CO2 because we fix that by doing something we are good at - buying stuff. The methane problem can be fixed too, but it involves a change in our behaviour, and that is always more difficult. Author Richard Oppenlander put it this way, “Renewable energy infrastructure such as building solar and wind generators all over our country to reduce climate change - that’s a pretty good idea, but it’s projected to take at least 20 years, and at least, minimally, \$18 trillion to develop. Another solution to climate change, we could stop eating animals. And it could be done today. And it certainly doesn’t have to take \$18 trillion, because it costs nothing.”

Quoting Lyman again, “You can’t be an environmentalist and eat animal products. Period. You don’t think we couldn’t solve this problem in a heartbeat? I’ll tell you what, all we would need is for the environmentalist to live what they profess, and we’d be on a new course in the world.”

So for the sake of our planet - you know, that planet that our children and grandchildren are going to live on - the short answer is that we need to stop eating meat, dairy, and eggs. Wait a minute - how did we get back to that “vegan” thing again? It’s almost as if the topic is important or something!

So let’s change topics once more to another aspect of health. Let’s talk about spiritual and emotional health. Surely that will be a topic that won’t affect us at the dinner table! One Christian virtue - not exclusively Christian of course - is our desire to be compassionate people. But what is compassion?

Compassion is how we connect with each other. We connect with each other in deep ways when we are really free to share our own life stories. And deep sharing of those stories requires someone who cares enough to really listen, and to value the other in our midst. That’s compassion. Of course, compassion cannot simply listen. Compassion also requires action. What action is required? Well, it depends on what you hear when you listen with your whole heart.

But as a basic minimum, compassion would seek to exclude and eradicate any forms of violence, cruelty, and suffering. So how is it then that 10 billion land animals are slaughtered every year in North America alone for food. That doesn’t sound like the

action of compassionate people. And even if we don't care about the suffering of sentient animals, the workers who work in slaughterhouses are also abused by the nature and violence of their work, and many of these workers develop PTSD, alcoholism, and suffer great emotional and spiritual anguish because of the work that they do.

And we ourselves are burdened by this too - often subconsciously. We know deep down what we are paying those workers to do on our behalf. And we know that we are paying them to do a job we would never do ourselves. How many of us took our children to an orchard to pick apples? How many of us took our children to tour a slaughterhouse? Exactly!

Wait a minute - how did we get back to that "vegan" thing again? I should probably just give up trying to avoid this topic.

This reflection has probably not been well-received today by many of you. As humans, we generally don't like change. The second worst thing is to be told we have to change. But the absolute worst thing is to be given good, sensible reasons why we should do it. For better or worse I have to say, "Vegans are right. Get over it."

But to balance our dislike of change, I actually see great hope in this message too. If you are like me, you read the news regularly. And each week - if not each day - we are presented with stories about destruction, devastation, war, illness, killings, and those stories can overwhelm us. We feel powerless. We feel like we can't do anything to heal our world. We don't even know where to start. It's very demoralizing.

But if we eliminate - or reduce - our consumption of meat, dairy, and eggs, we actually get a pretty big bang for our buck - in terms of our physical health, the health of our planet, and our own spiritual wellbeing. Our hope comes from the fact that we can make a difference. We just need to change our habits, which is of course harder than changing a lightbulb. But we can make a real difference. And I find great hope in that.

And I'd like to share with you that I myself am "transitioning to vegan", but I plan to do it without irritating people too much. I don't plan to be perfect. I had lunch with the men's group at Wally's last week, and I didn't throw a fit about the food there. I plan to sample and enjoy every dish at our Tastes of Martin Grove after service. I will try

to not be too irritating.

At the same time, if you are interested in the whole vegan idea, we can meet to discuss issues, watch some films, we could even get together to learn to cook vegan foods together. I'm happy to teach what I have learned, and I have lots to learn myself. Just let me know if you want to explore veganism together.

But right now, let's return to our question from our Pop Quiz. "Does Christianity have any rules about what we should eat?" But now I propose a more complete answer. If you think of Christianity as a religion, then no, as we said before, we don't really have any rules about what we should eat. But if you think of Christianity as a faith, meaning a way of thinking and acting, faith as a way of living, then yes, Christianity does have a lot to say about what we eat. Because Christianity as a faith definitely cares a great deal about human health (both for the overfed and the malnourished), the health of the planet, and the spiritual and emotional health of all animals - the human and the non-human animals.

As I mentioned earlier, Howard Lyman said "you can't be an environmentalist and eat meat products. Period". I wonder if we can at least imagine a world in our future where someone says, "you can't be a Christian and eat meat products. Period". I wonder. I wonder.

Amen.