
Vegans are right. Get over it.
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

Today we celebrate World Food Sunday. Isn't that wonderful? I confess that this year, it seems a bit less wonderful because we are not actually meeting together. Which means we will not be sharing food after this service. Isn't sharing food the whole point of World Food Sunday? I mean, what else could it be about? Perhaps you expect to be fed in a different way today. Perhaps you expect a boring, inoffensive, and completely predictable sermon about how we need to learn to share? Sorry, but I figure you've already heard that sermon. We can have a more interesting conversation.

So let's start with a pop quiz, since you liked the pop quiz about communion.
[slide: does christianity have any rules about what we should eat?]

The question is, "Does Christianity have any rules about what we should eat?"

Basically, no. Some Catholics don't eat fish on Fridays. Many people choose to give up a particular food for lent - usually a treat, not real food. But 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. Only fruits and vegetables? That would make us vegan. I'm sure there is a translation error somewhere.

[slide: broadview]

How many of us read the United Church magazine, Broadview. Do you know that Broadview was started in 1829? That was in Methodist days of course, and it was called The Christian Guardian. It has been through a number of name changes. In any case, Broadview is the oldest continuously published magazine in North America. As you might imagine, they keep track how people respond to their articles.

Do you know what one topic generated the strongest reactions over the past 191 years? Well, as you might expect, the topic of human sexuality and gender generated the strongest response from readers. OK, that was an easy question. Here's a harder question.

What topic generated the second strongest reaction from readers?

The topic that generated the second strongest reaction was ... food. That's why I think that World Food Sunday should not be boring and predictable. But I suppose I should be a little more accurate. The topic that generated all the heat was connecting the word "food" with the word "health".

[slide: health]

Now, when I just said the word "health" what did you think of? 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 2 billion people are malnourished or undernourished. On the other end of the spectrum, an estimated 2 billion people are overweight or obese. Clearly, food is related to health in many ways.

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. The idea that health and diet are related is not new.

[slide: let food be your medicine]

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, eating meat, dairy, and eggs is unhealthy. The typical North American diet contributes to early death. It also contributes to reduced quality of life due to heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and other conditions.

And what about under-nourished 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 - the overfed and the underfed - we should stop eating so much meat, dairy and eggs. Current research affirms what we read in Genesis 1, that we should be vegan.

And now that I’ve used the “V” word - vegan - here’s full disclosure. The Broadview article that generated such a backlash was about food and health. But it focused on veganism.

[slide: vegans are right cover]

The article from 2016 was called, “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 of Canada.

Well, I'm sure that the last thing you want to hear on World Food Sunday is a sermon about veganism. 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?

[slide: inconvenient truth]

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 anyway¹.

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.

[slide: land use]

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

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2006/11/201222-rearing-cattle-produces-more-greenhouse-gases-driving-cars-un-report-warns>

aspects of environmental degradation, including the destruction of rain forests at a rate of 1 acre per second.

[slide: deforestation]

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). Moreover 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 Government's sites - the focus is on buying new products 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.

[slide: renewable]

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."

[slide: earth]

So for the sake of our planet - you know, that planet that our children and grandchildren are going to live on - we need to greatly reduce eating meat, dairy, and

eggs. Wait a minute - how did we get back to that “vegan” thing again? It’s almost like the topic is important or something!

[slide: spiritual health]

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?

[slide: compassion 1]

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.

[slide: compassion 2]

But as a basic minimum, compassion seeks to 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, we should care about the workers who work in slaughterhouses. They are abused by the nature and violence of their work. 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.

[slide: abs on and off]

This reflection may not have 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 for 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.

[slide: hope]

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

However you are feeling about this message today, I hope that at a minimum it might help you understand your grandchildren and other family members better. Many people - but in particular younger people - are questioning what they choose to put on their plates today. And we should encourage them to do that.

And just so you know, Marjorie and I are not vegan, but we have moved a long way towards that goal, and we continue to learn as we go along. If you are interested in veganism, we can meet online to discuss it. There are some great films, and I have cooked with others online. I'm happy to share what I have learned, and I have lots to learn myself. Just let me know if you want to explore veganism together.

[slide: christianity and food]

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 cares a great deal about human health (both for the overfed and the malnourished). It cares about the health of the planet. And it cares about the spiritual and emotional health of all animals - the human and the non-human animals.

[slide: food sunday]

Creation is a gift to us all. Let us learn to share it wisely. Happy World Food Sunday!

Amen.