
World Food Day
Chapel in the Park United Church
October 18, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-8 and Matthew 22:1-14

[image: wedding banquet]

Since today is World Food Day, I wanted to discuss that story from Matthew. The story that we call “the parable of the wedding banquet”. Because when I think of food, I think of a banquet. What do you think of that story? And in particular, what memories of that story do we carry in our heads?

I suspect that for many of us - our memory of that story comes from the Sunday School Song, “I cannot come”. I cannot come to the banquet, don’t bother me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow”. You know the one.

The version of the story that we carry in our heads is a nice story. A king prepares a great wedding banquet. The king then invites all the “right” people to come to the banquet. But none of them come, because they are busy. So the king invites everyone off the streets to come to the banquet. Because it was more important to have a massive party than it was to have the “right” guests. When we hear the story that way, the story is about sharing with those in need. It is also about how we ourselves should be open to new possibilities that appear to us, sometimes with little warning. It’s a nice story.

Now I’m wondering if any of you noticed that the story we just read from Matthew includes 2 details that we do not carry in our heads. 2 details that did not make it into that Sunday school song.

- After some of the people refused to come: “The king was enraged. He sent his troops and burned their city.”
- And near the end, the King meets someone at the party who is not dressed properly and tells his servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

You know, If we ignore those parts of the story - those irritating bits about burning cities and throwing a person into outer darkness, we get a story that we like. We like to imagine that the story is about how everyone is welcome at the table. Because that's a great message. But when we read the whole story ... it is really not that simple.

I'm sure we have all heard countless sermons about this story. And I'll bet that in 99% of them, those irritating bits of the story were simply ignored.

I suppose preachers like to ignore those irritating parts of the story because if we do, then we get a message that we like. A preacher would have to be nuts to even want to talk about those irritating parts of the story, right? A preacher would have to be either crazy ... or be me. Because of course I cannot ignore those parts of the story.

Because if we ignore those irritating parts of the story, then we cannot really come to grips with the full story. That is true for reading the Bible. It is also true with our own personal life stories. We cannot come to grips with our own life story if we keep refusing to look deeply at the irritating bits of our own story and therefore do not learn what we can from them. We need to learn what we can from the irritating bits of every story.

[image: opening words to story]

To make any real sense of this story - the whole story - we need to realize that there is one word in the story that is completely wrong. And if we change that one word, the story will make more sense. The word that we need to correct is the word "parable".

[image: fix "parable"]

Because the story was not written as a parable. It was written as an analog. And I want to illustrate why that matters by bringing in another story.

[image: animal farm]

Who here remembers the story Animal Farm? Animal Farm is a story written by George Orwell in 1945. As written, the story is about life on a farm. On this particular farm, the animals come to the conclusion that the human farmers do very little of the real work and yet they take all of the produce. It is the animals who pull the ploughs, haul things, lay eggs, get slaughtered. So the animals as a group stage a revolt. They kick out the human farmers, and take control of the farm themselves.

[image: all animals are equal]

In the early days of new management the animals all share in the work and they share in the profits. They declare that all animals are equal.

But over time, that sense of equality disappears. Because the pigs decide that they are smarter than the other animals. They decide they should do the thinking, and leave the physical work to the other animals. The pigs move into the farm house, give lots of orders, and spend their days eating and drinking.

[slide: some animals are more equal]

The slogan changes to “All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others.”

The pigs in fact become identical to the original human farmers. In the end, the farm animals are no better off than when they started. The only difference is that the pigs are now running the farm, not the original humans.

So what is Animal Farm all about? Is it about animals taking over a farm? Well, no. Because Animal Farm was written as an analog. It is an analog to the Russian Revolution of 1917-1918.

The farm represents Russia. The human farmer represents the last Tsar of Russia. Napoleon - one of the most obnoxious pigs - represents Stalin. Snowball - one of the idealistic pigs - represents Trotsky. Boxer - the workhorse - represents the working class. The sheep represent the masses. The story is really about how the Russian peasants did not make any significant gains during the Russian Revolution. They were just subject to different masters after the revolution was over.

[slide: wedding banquet]

Similarly, the story of the wedding banquet was written as an analog. But before I explain it, I need to point out that the United Church of Canada rejects the analog interpretation - because it is fundamentally antisemitic. But here is the analog so that you understand why Matthew wrote the story the way that he did.

In the story of the wedding banquet - The king is God. The invitation to come to the banquet is the invitation to accept Jesus as the messiah. The people who were originally invited to the banquet are the Jewish people living in Palestine in Jesus's day. As we know, the Jewish people in Palestine largely rejected Jesus as their messiah. So the

king (God) invites other people - non-Jewish people - to the banquet. To the “Jesus club”.

And what about the irritating bits of the story? In classic Jewish theology, bad things happen when the people are not faithful to God. The cities were burned because the people did not accept Jesus. And what about the person who was thrown out for not being dressed properly? Opinions differ, but the consensus is that the person who was thrown out represents the pharisees who spoke the right words but did not really believe.

And I want to be very clear on this. Matthew was wrong. Some churches do preach that Christians replaced Jews in God’s eye - an idea that is called “replacement theology”, or “supercessionism”. But the United Church completely rejects that idea.

So - as I promised in Chit-Chat - now we know why the story of the wedding banquet was not about food.

[slide: alarm clock]

If you’ve been sleeping up to now, it's to wake up. So let’s get back to talking about food.

[image: cat hospital]

One of the privileges of ministry is spending time with people as they prepare to die, or are suffering from chronic health issues. Another privilege is spending time with the family of those people. It is a true honour to be with people when we dig deep and discuss the realities of life, and death. Of relationships, regrets, joys. In other words, when we open up and get honest about our lives. It is truly an honour to help people die well and to help families live well.

At the same time, over the years I have been in professional ministry I have come to realize that many people in my congregations suffer from similar types of medical conditions. A short list of common conditions includes:

- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Dementia

This is not a big surprise of course. In Canada, Heart disease is the #1 cause of

non-accidental death. Cancer comes in second. Diabetes is very common. And sadly, Dementia is far more common than I like.

Why are we talking about this today? It's simply this.

Please do your own research and do not take my word for this. But the research that I have done suggests that there are strong linkages between all of these medical conditions and the foods that we choose to eat. Specifically, the consumption of meat, dairy, and eggs. Also, the consumption of highly processed foods.

And so on World Food Sunday, I am compelled to give you my annual sale pitch for whole-food, plant-based eating. Because on balance, I'd rather not have to visit you in hospital. If you want to chat with me, just reach out - you don't have to wait until you are in a hospital.

This year, I am not advocating giving up meat, dairy, and eggs. Just give up 75%. Because according to one study, our planet would breath a lot more easily if we all reduced our consumption of meat, dairy, and eggs by 75%.

And to be clear. I am not plant-based myself. Marjorie and I have moved a long way towards that goal, but we are not perfect. Even if you all get up and leave right now I will continue to preach - to myself - because I work to hear this message too.

[image: what categories are in Canada's food guide?]

Let me start with a quiz. We are likely familiar with Canada's Food Guide. What are the food categories in Canada's Food Guide?

Let people offer ideas.

[image: Canada Food Guide - old]

Some of you are good students, because you remembered very well - the old Canada's Food Guide. The main categories were milk and milk products, meat and alternatives, bread and cereal, and fruits and vegetables.

[image: Canada Food Guide]

But Canada changed it's Food Guide. The Guide no longer give meat and dairy as food groups. Instead, we are directed to eat modest amounts of protein, whole grain foods, and fruits and vegetables. In this picture, you will notice that meat is still present, but in quite small portions. There is an egg - 1/4 of an egg. And milk is no longer

recommended. The plate is not about what we should not eat. It is about what wonderful foods we should eat - including beans, lentils, nuts, and a very wide and colourful selection of vegetables. And I hope that when you look at that plate, you are thinking, “well, that looks ok”.

I do not want to repeat what I’ve said in previous years, but the main reasons to reduce our consumption of meat, dairy and eggs include:

[image: compassion for animals]

- Compassion for animals. 70+ billion land animals are killed every year for use as food. Not only are they killed in very inhuman ways, but most of those animals are raised in factory farm. Those animals live their entire lives in terrible conditions.

[image: compassion for slaughter-house workers]

- Compassion for slaughter-house workers who experience high levels of PTSD, alcoholism, and other mental health conditions. Pigs and cows are gentle, loving creatures. And watching them suffer and be killed all day long leads to long-term mental health issues for slaughter-house workers.

[image: compassion for your body]

- Personal health - reducing our own likelihood of getting heart disease, cancer, diabetes, dementia, as well as other diseases. Moreover, people who switch to more plant-based diets live longer and have more energy. Many people have completely reversed their type-2 diabetes on a plant-based diet.

[image: compassion for the earth]

- Earth health - reducing the environmental impacts of animal-based eating systems. Animal agriculture is responsible for most of the destruction of the rain forest, but also contributes significantly to climate change and water pollution. Today, 4 billion hectares of land are used for food production. 3 billion of those hectares are for animal agriculture. If those 3 billion hectares were allowed to re-wild, we would sequester 26 gigaton of carbon every year.

[image: compassion for the global hungry]

- Global Food security. The world can hardly feed the mouths that we have today. Animal agriculture is every inefficient. Reducing our consumption of animals

results in more total food for human consumption. If the grains we use to feed animals were just fed to humans, we could feed an additional 3.5 billion people each year.

I've discussed all of those topics in greater detail in previous sermons. Please reach out if you'd like any more info from my perspective. Or watch some of the curated material that is online. There are some great, thought-provoking documentaries these days about food and how it impacts our bodies, our planet, and our world.

And I want to leave you with something that sounds more positive. Because I am seriously asking all of us - including myself - to consider reducing our intake of meat, dairy, and eggs by 75%. And reducing our use of highly processed foods. Because I care for you.

There are 4 basic ways to enjoy plant-based foods:

[image: apple]

1. Realize that you already eat plant-based food. Do you ever eat an apple? Or some nuts? Many plant-based foods are just regular food. How about a peanut butter and jam sandwich. That's plant-based (depending on the bread you use). Yes, some plant-based foods sound strange, like tempeh and tofu. But many plant-based foods are things that you already call food. You already eat plant-based food.

[image: fake foods]

2. The simplest way to eat plant-based is to take your favourite recipe and substitute in plant-based alternatives for the non-plant-based ingredients. For example, if you like spaghetti and meatballs, just use plant-based meatballs and the meal is plant-based. There are a variety of plant-based "substitutes" in our grocery stores these days. This is the simplest way to eat plant-based. However in general it is the most expensive option and also give you the most highly processed foods. It is not my favourite option.

[image: food hack]

3. A really fun way to eat plant-based is using cheap food hacks. Instead of buying those more expensive plant-based meatballs, just substitute a plant-based item that

is NOT the same as a meatball, but fills the same roll as a meatball. For example, falafels work just as well as meatballs and are cheaper than plant-based meatballs. If you like parmesan cheese, replace it with crushed roasted, salted peanuts. The peanuts add the oil and salt that you want from the cheese.

[image: international foods]

4. Instead of trying to change your North American diet, realize the most of the world is vegetarian, and try some recipes from around the world. This is the cheapest option. Because you will end up eating lentils, beans, rice, and other inexpensive ingredients. Plus you may really enjoy some new flavours.

[image: world food day]

This World Food Day - don't think about what you might have to give up to live a more healthy life. Think about what new foods you can try. Taste and flavour are gifts from God, right? Gifts from God that we can all enjoy.

Amen.