

Feb. 1, 2015
Mark 2:23-28
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Science and Religion: Food

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

This month I am doing a three week series on Science and Religion. Today the focus is on food as we begin our adult education series, *Windows on Food*. Next week we'll talk about evolution and then the nature of God.

Food is rarely far from our thoughts. Maybe you've already been day-dreaming about what you will have for lunch or what you will have to munch on tonight during the Super Bowl. Isn't it ironic that millions of us will consume extra, probably unnecessary, calories to sit and watch as just a few players burn up well over a 1,000 calories each during the game. Oh well.

At the same time, we know there are many people today – all around the world and very close to home - who will go to bed hungry. Our trip to Mid Coast Hunger Prevention Program after worship will give us more insights into local food insecurity and ways we can help.

In today's scripture reading the hungry disciples are gathering grain. Simple enough. But there is a hitch. They are doing so on the Sabbath. There were

religious laws that didn't allow the "work" of gathering the grain on the Sabbath. As we will hear Jesus puts some perspective on those laws. Food and Sabbath are both meant to nourish people.

SERMON

Food is not necessarily one of the first topics that comes to mind when we think of the dialogue between science and religion. However, there are few things as central to life and religious practice as food. Science gives us information about the food we eat and how our bodies utilize food. It also helps devise new techniques for growing food. Religion brings ethical considerations to those techniques for production and distribution of food. Religious practices also attribute spiritual meaning to particular foods.

In our experience of communion this morning, food and faith were intertwined. The grain of the field and the fruit of the vine - the basic daily foods that Jesus and his followers shared - not only fed our bodies but also nourished our spirits as together we are the Body of Christ.

Food is of great significance in all religious traditions. Each tradition has, at its core, practices of giving thanks for food. In addition, each tradition has foods that carry particular significance such as our communion which has connections to the Jewish seder. On the other hand, many traditions forbid particular foods such as the many Hindu groups that are strictly vegetarian. There are times to eat and times to fast, such as the month of Ramadan for Muslims, where they may not eat or drink from sunup to sundown. There are also spiritual practices of relying entirely on others for daily bread, seen in the begging practices of some Buddhist monks - a reminder that none of us makes it alone.

As we increasingly live in a multi-religious culture, we will find we have more choices on the smorgasbord of foods but we also will need to be respectful of other's practices. One of the things we Americans have added to the world wide smorgasbord is the quintessential hamburger. Yet even the hamburger has had to make room for other foods, including for religious reasons.

When I was a child our school lunches on Fridays always included fish, respecting the Catholic practice of not eating meat on Fridays. It was this practice of fasting from meat on Fridays that influenced McDonald's to introduce the Filet-O-Fish sandwich. In 1962 Lou Groen was the first MacDonald's franchise owner in Cincinnati. He was having trouble selling

burgers on Fridays because he was in a largely Catholic area. His solution? A fish sandwich. Today that sandwich is also appreciated by Muslims because it is considered halal even without special preparations, whereas the burgers are not.

Religion brings symbolic significance to food. It also brings ethical considerations. Whereas, science can help us to be more "productive" in growing food and in satisfying our desires for variety and taste, religion asks when is that a good thing and when is it not?

In his first letter to the Corinthians (6:19) the Apostle Paul reminded them "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" - a bold affirmation. Therefore, for the Body of Christ to be well, our bodies need to be well.

These days we realize something Paul wouldn't have even needed to consider - for our bodies to be well our planet must also be well. With the significant increase in the world's population in the 20th century and the anticipated increase in this 21st century, what we humans eat is dramatically affecting the whole creation.

Which brings us back to the all-American hamburger - a high packed food source - maybe good in small doses but increasingly an unsustainable food at the current rates of consumption.

A recent report from a prominent panel of government scientists was not good

news for the beef industry. The report suggested a reworking of the food pyramid to reflect the heavy carbon impact of raising animals for meat. Studies indicate that cows, in particular, with their heavy release of gases, trampling of soil and a need for massive amounts of water are a significant factor in climate change, even exceeding the impact of the transportation sector.

An international agency, the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition, has already developed two food pyramids - one showing what is good for the human body and the other what is good for the planet's body. Beef doesn't do well on either chart. It ranks as the least personally healthy (along with sweets) and the least environmentally sound food. Needless to say, fruits and veggies are good for our bodies and have the lowest environmental impact. I suspect many of our grandmothers could have told us that.

Scientific studies show us that after the energy industry, food is the next most important factor in global sustainability. Spiritual gratitude for creation itself leads us to realize that what is good for us must also be good for the planet. It appears that the hamburger needs to make room for other foods for the good of the planet.

We live in a "foody" area. Portland is on many "foody" maps and we have a thriving farmer's market culture. Maybe that is why part time vegetarians and low meat eaters already make up 30 to

40% of the population in Maine. (Portland Press Herald 1/21/2015) I realize I've been on a journey of reducing my meat intake for years. It's amazing how long it takes to change ingrained patterns.

Even small steps can make a big difference. Lao-tzu, an ancient Chinese philosopher, put it this way, *A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.* Neil Armstrong, when stepping on the moon for the first time, said, "That's one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind."

I want to finish with a story about Neil Armstrong's fellow astronaut, Buzz Aldrin. On that first moon day—a day of great scientific achievement – Aldrin chose to ritualize the experience with a special bit of food - communion. In his 2009 book, *Magnificent Desolation*, Buzz tells how he brought communion from his church and a three-by-five card with the passage from John which begins, "I am the vine, you are the branches." He says,

I poured a thimbleful of wine from a sealed plastic container into a small chalice, and waited for the wine to settle down as it swirled in the one-sixth Earth gravity of the moon.

My comments to the world were inclusive: "I would like to request a few moments of silence ... and to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks

in his or her own way." I silently read the Bible passage as I partook of the wafer and the wine, and offered a private prayer for the task at hand and the opportunity I had been given.

Neil watched respectfully, but made no comment to me at the time.

Perhaps, if I had it to do over again, I would not choose to celebrate communion. Although it was a deeply meaningful experience for me, it was a Christian sacrament, and we had come to the moon in the name of all mankind — be they Christians, Jews, Muslims, animists, agnostics, or atheists. But at the time I could think of no better way to acknowledge the enormity of the Apollo 11 experience than by giving thanks to God. It was my hope that people would keep the whole event in their minds and see, beyond minor details and technical achievements, a deeper meaning — a challenge, and the human need to explore whatever is above us, below us, or out there.

Buzz Aldrin, deeply invested in scientific exploration and deeply moved by spiritual gratitude, chose a religious ritual of food - using the grain of the earth and fruit of the vine - the bread of life and the cup of blessing- to simply be with the Mystery and to give thanks. Makes sense to me.