



Meeting the World at My Dinner Table

TEXT
Luke 14:12-14
Gen. 2:4b-9, 15-17

November 24, 2013 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The Bible says Jesus took bread, and he blessed it, and he broke it, and he gave it to his disciples, saying, “This is my body.”

If I understand it, he wasn’t just saying that the meal served at this table¹ is holy; I think he was saying a meal at any table is holy. So much of the gospel message is revealed at table.

When Jesus broke bread, he often broke protocol. He ate with the wrong people: Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?²

When he broke bread, he fed his followers what they hungered for most. Do you remember the time when the table was large enough for 5,000: just green grass that sprung up in the desert café?³

On the Emmaus Road, it was when bread was broken that their eyes were opened.⁴ After the Resurrection, Peter jumps out of the boat and swims to shore to find Jesus cooking breakfast.⁵ Often the table was where Jesus showed us how things ought to be changed.

He taught us, saying, when you throw a banquet, invite those who can’t pay you back. Invite the lame, the blind and the poor. It’s just kingdom etiquette.⁶

When he spots a tax collector up a tree, he invites himself to lunch. Everyone else who was following him stood out in the street and grumbled.⁷

What happens at the table is important. It is one of the clearest places we meet God.

This week, tables will be spread with a feast, and family and friends will gather around and take time to remember all the reasons we should be grateful. Thanksgiving is a once-a-year kind of meal that really should remind us what all the other meals are for: gratitude and connection with our primary relationships.

I met God at the table. I wasn’t expecting it. It was Sunday, May 29, 2011. We were at the lunch table in our home, and Nathan said, “Great sermon, Dad.” I know this will shock you, but he doesn’t say that every Sunday.

We talked about the sermon for perhaps an hour. It was a wonderful and interesting conversation. I got up to take my dishes to the dishwasher, and my son said, “Dad, we aren’t finished. You haven’t told me yet: What are you going to do about it?” I wanted to say, “Son, I’m a preacher; I delegate doing.”

The sermon in question was the last in a series titled “Jesus and Galileo,” a series on the intersection of faith and science; and the “it” in that particular sermon was climate change. Like many young people, my children became interested in matters of the climate before I did. As my son said, they have more riding on this than I do.

In December 1988, the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environmental Program appointed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). They released their first report in 1990, and every six years since then, they have released a new report, with the fifth report coming out this year and next.

Over 2,000 scientists and climatologists make up the IPCC, and, in a nutshell, they report that the planet is warming and that human beings are a contributing factor. We have changed how we live in the industrial age, and our new way of living has consequences. While it hasn’t been part of the metric heretofore, how we measure the costs of consumption going forward needs to include costs to the systems of the earth that support life: air, water, even soil.

Now I know that, when talking about these matters, using phrases like “in a nutshell” will omit some nuance that is important. I’m not trying to ignore complexities in this conversation; but I do want us to get home before lunch.

I also know that we live in a time when the scientific community is viewed with suspicion from some surprising places. Those who question evolution, for example, are never too far from political power in this state. The voice of science regarding climate change is often questioned by some politicians and some business leaders and even some news organizations. I have a trust in science. And when it comes to the climate, the overwhelming voice is the position supported by the IPCC.

If the IPCC is right, then I would suggest that climate change is the most significant ethical issue in human history. It affects the entire human family, but like most world crises, the poor will be the first affected. It’s not that the climate can tell who is poor. Katrina hit New Orleans and Sandy hit New York, and neither has completely recovered. But after the typhoon that hit the Philippines earlier this month, leaving over 5,000 dead, they lack the resources to recover.

The central scientific reality is that the gas makeup of the atmosphere is changing. CO₂, or carbon dioxide, is a major culprit.⁸ CO₂ allows the sunlight to stream through the atmosphere, but CO₂ also captures heat. This means the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere is critical. Too little,

and we freeze. Too much, and we warm. The CO₂ is measured in how many parts per million. They say when there were 180 parts per million (ppm) in the atmosphere, the earth experienced an Ice Age. Geologists point to five glacial periods. The most recent Ice Age ended approximately 20,000 years ago. The CO₂ in the atmosphere climbed to approximately 280 ppm to end these glacial periods. Today it measures 391 ppm.⁹ The planet is warming. These are measurable realities.

The change in the atmosphere results in significant consequences: shrinking ice caps, rising tides, greater intensity in storms, coastlands threatened. You know the story. And my son wants to know what I’m going to do about it? So we talked about what to do.

Carol and I decided to change our diet. Our children already had. Beginning that Sunday, Carol and I began to reduce how much meat we eat. I have eaten meat when I have dined at other people’s homes, but there have been less than a half a dozen times I have eaten meat of my own choosing in the last 2½ years. People ask, “Do you feel better?” Not really; not physically. But spiritually, it has been the most significant change in over 10 years.

Here’s why. The approach to bringing food to our tables has made a dramatic change in the past generation. One reason is there are a lot more mouths to feed. It took the history of the human family until 1800 to reach one billion people on earth.

But that first billion grew to two billion in only 123 years. That was reached in 1927. Today the global population is 7 billion, and it took only 12 years to grow from 6 billion. There are many more mouths to feed.

Some began to wonder if the traditional ways of farming could feed a growing global population. Some of you practice this as a livelihood and will know more about this than I, but in the past generation, we have moved to produce food in a factory method. While some are not convinced, others observe that this has made food production more efficient and provides the foods that affluent nations find most desirable.

We have genetically modified the turkeys that will be eaten this week to grow larger and faster, and we have done the same with chickens that are eaten every other week. Cattle that used to spend time eating grass until slaughter now begin that way, but find their way to CAFO’s or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. We call them feedlots. In these, cows eat more corn than humans in this country today.

Some are concerned about factory farming because of cruelty to animals. We live in a culture that dotes on our pets; but the animals we eat live anything but a comfortable life. In many factories, a hog spends the majority of her life in a concrete stall so small she can’t turn around.

It is an unintended consequence (and it *is* unintended) that we are all engaged in factory farming, and no one is setting out

to create negative consequences for the environment; but damage to the environment is a consequence nevertheless.

There are no simple answers. Every response is complicated. But what is measurable is the science of the production of food: It takes about 13 pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef.¹⁰ And the corn has to be fertilized and transported.

If all the world ate the amount of meat that the affluent world now eats, unless there are radical bioengineering advances, it would require 67 percent more agricultural land than the world possesses.¹¹ The University of Chicago produced a study recently that found food choices influence the climate more than transportation choices.

Let me get more specific: According to Peter Singer and his book *The Ethics of What We Eat*, this University of Chicago study asserts that the typical U.S. diet contains about 28 percent meat: hot dogs at the ballgame; chicken on a Caesar salad; barbecue. These animal sources for our food generate the equivalent of nearly 1.5 tons more carbon dioxide per person per year than a vegan diet with the same number of calories. By comparison, an average driver switching from a typical American car to a more fuel-efficient hybrid would save one ton of carbon dioxide per year. What's on the table has more impact.¹²

Amazon rain forests are being cleared at an annual rate of six million acres to raise cattle and grow the soybeans to feed them.¹³ That's 11 acres a minute.

The rain forests are sometimes called the lungs of the atmosphere, taking CO₂ and producing oxygen. Their reduction further tips the balance.

The Land Institute reports that as we grow corn — not just for corn on the cob, but for bio-fuels and for cattle — the lack of biodiversity is weakening the soil. So it has to be fertilized, and as much as 40 percent or even more of the nitrogen applied to crop lands never reach the plants. It gets washed downstream.

Runoff measured on Iowa fields in 2009 exceeded an average 136,000 gallons an acre. The nitrogen runoff ends up in the atmosphere, some as greenhouse gases, or it makes its way down creeks, streams and rivers until it reaches saltwater and causes hypoxic, or dead zones to form.¹⁴

The oyster industry in the Chesapeake Bay has taken a hit because of dead zones. It is the runoff of waste of 600 million chickens raised every year in the Delaware/Maryland/Virginia peninsula. The land cannot handle the waste, and the runoff creates dead zones in the ocean. The same happens in the Gulf of Mexico.

The way seafood is captured, in many instances, is unsustainable. Take shrimp, for example. The average shrimp trawling operation throws 80 to 90 percent of the sea animals it captures overboard, dead or dying, as "bycatch." Shrimp account for only two percent of global seafood by weight, but shrimp trawling accounts for 33 percent of global "bycatch."¹⁵ So when I order my shrimp platter at McCormick and

Schmick's or Red Lobster, it's like setting the table with 8 to 12 other plates of seafood that were thrown in the trash.

It is legitimate to question how sustainable such harvesting is. I have changed my mind about this. I love my neighbor — not only by who is welcomed at the table, but also by what is served at the table. What has surprised me is the spiritual difference this has made in my own life. It has become the most significant spiritual practice of my life. Every meal for me is sacred now. Every bite feels like an act of love for the least of these. It has changed my life. It has given me a sense of hope in the face of the most significant moral issue in history.

My testimony is this: If you find a way to love your neighbor every day, it is life-giving. I'm not trying to change your mind. I'm just letting you know how I have changed mine and why I am grateful I have. If you share my concern about the planet, you don't have to give up meat completely. Even reducing your meat intake one day a week will make a difference to the least of these.

A last word: It's complicated. Ethics always are. All of us make choices every day that affect other people — most of whom we never meet. When we are intentional about those choices, it not only makes a difference to our neighbors, it makes a difference to us. At least in this case, that has been my experience.

For Further Reading:

Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (2006), follows three different

families that he calls (1) The Standard American Diet; (2) The Conscientious Omnivores; and (3) The Vegans; explores ethical issues across a wide spectrum, not just climate issues.

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (2009), explores the implications of factory farming on animals. This is a hard read.

Bill McKibben, *Eaarth* (2010) — His thesis is that the earth has already reached a point that will make it difficult, if not impossible, to return; a tipping point of sorts.

Fred Pearce, *When the Rivers Run Dry* (2006) — Water issues are significant (and local). Changes in weather and agriculture have altered accessibility to water, which Pearce calls “the defining crisis of the 21st century. Water is the new oil. Countries will (in some places already are) go to war over water.

Wendell Berry, *Bringing It to the Table*: A collection of essays and fiction that offer reflection on the farming life and the spirituality of the table.

TheLandInstitute.org: the website of The Land Institute of Salina, Kansas, that advocates and researches sustainable agriculture.

⁸Methane gas is also a critical concern in the shifting makeup of the atmosphere.

⁹epa.gov

¹⁰Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (2006), p 232; Erik Marcus, *Meat Market: Animals, Ethics and Money* (2005), p. 255

¹¹Singer, p. 233

¹²Singer, p. 240

¹³Singer, p. 233

¹⁴thelandinstitute.org

¹⁵Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (2009), p. 49

¹Meaning the communion table in the Sanctuary.

²Matthew 9:11

³Mark 6:36

⁴Luke 24

⁵John 21

⁶Luke 14

⁷Luke 19

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.