

## **Love, Pray, Eat**

**A sermon preached by Carmen Emerson, Ministerial Intern  
On November 29, 2009**

### **Introduction**

Over two decades ago I attended my first social justice committee meeting at the First Unitarian Church of Orlando. We had a full agenda, as church committees often do, and so I was surprised at the amount of time that we spent on our first agenda item. We needed to decide on our contribution to an upcoming church dinner to be hosted by all of the church committees.

It was finally agreed that we would contribute chili to the church dinner—the kind of chili that Christine described a few weeks ago: tomato based, with onions, beans, and ground beef. The ground beef was at the heart of the impassioned debate. “Will we provide chili with meat, or vegetarian chili?” Twenty minutes later someone cautiously suggested that we offer both chili with meat, and chili without meat, and let people make their own choices about which to eat.

The motion passed unanimously.

We are, indeed, passionate about our food. Of course we are! Together with clean water, food is essential to life, and good food is essential to a healthy life. What makes food “good” is debatable, to some extent, although we know the less processed the better, and the more local the better. Better for us, better for our environment, and better for justice and equity throughout the interdependent web. Today, though, I want to look beyond the *nutritional and ethical values* of good food to consider other ways that food is “good” for us.

### **Love—Sustenance and Nurture**

To begin, I state unequivocally that love precedes good food. Preparing and sharing good food is one of the primary ways we express our sustaining love for one another. Think about the times you have prepared a special meal for someone: perhaps for a child coming home from college, or in celebration of a friend’s birthday. Think about the times you have received good food from another person: perhaps when you’ve fallen ill, or have been recovering from surgery. Think of the times you have comforted, or have been comforted by, an offering of good food, prepared in love.

*This church has a rich tradition of sharing food as an expression of love and care. Consider the innumerable potluck dinners here! For anyone who may not know, there is a potluck dinner in the social hall every Wednesday night from 5:30 to 7:30, and all are welcome. Often there are potluck dinners before, during, and after meetings.*

We opened the church year this past September with an all-church potluck—my first all-church event as an intern. It was a wonderful celebration of homecoming and welcome that sent this message: We care about one another. We care about our community. We are glad to be together.

We also witness and receive such loving care every Sunday, during coffee hour, when volunteers prepare coffee, tea, what passes for lemonade, and snacks to curb our midmorning/midday hunger. UU congregations joke about our coffee communions, but

## First Unitarian

*A Unitarian Universalist Congregation*

*Meeting in Albuquerque, Carlsbad, East Mountains, and Socorro, New Mexico*

much truth is said in jest. “Give *us* this day, *our* daily bread,” Jesus taught the disciples to pray, not give “*me*” this day “*my*” daily bread.

For centuries human beings have known that sharing food with another person is a profound message of hospitality, care, and belonging. That’s what our coffee hours are about, too. (And, by the way, that is why it is so important to personally welcome those visitors who have been brave enough to take a yellow coffee mug!)

Preparing good food for another person begins with that most special of ingredients: our time. We spend time growing, or shopping for, the perfect ingredients. Then we spend time cleaning, peeling, chopping, mixing, and cooking those perfect ingredients. And while we cook, the people we are preparing to feed occupy space in our minds, and in our hearts.

Hopefully we will savor this carefully prepared meal, face to face, with those who have taken such care to provide for us. To savor is, by definition, to give oneself over to the enjoyment of the food. *To savor is to give oneself over to the enjoyment of the food.* Food is good for us when it inspires us to slow down, to savor life. To surrender our time and attention to food made good by love is one way that we express our gratitude for such sustenance.

## Pray

Another way of expressing our gratitude for the loving sustenance of good food is to pray before a meal—asking a blessing, or offering a grace. Given our theological diversity, asking a blessing or offering a grace can be a complicated endeavor!

Asking a blessing becomes complicated because we UUs first want to know, “From whom are we asking this blessing?” Of course the beauty of our faith tradition is that each person can answer that question for himself or herself!

Naturalist Wendell Berry writes, “A significant part of the pleasure of eating is one’s accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes.”<sup>1</sup> Asking a blessing is an act of consciousness, an acknowledgement of all the efforts that brought this food, lovingly prepared, to our tables.

It is an acknowledgment of the possibilities that emerge in our lives because we are well nourished, in body and in spirit. Such conscious acknowledgment could be this simple: “Spirit of Life, Bless all who worked to bring this food to the table, and bless the work for which it sustains us.”

Offering a grace becomes complicated because some of us negatively associate the word “grace” with Christian doctrines of original sin, atonement, and election. For our Calvinist ancestors, to be in a “state of grace” was to be one of God’s chosen elect. Such election meant that one had special favor from God, despite our status as depraved human beings condemned by original sin. Our Unitarian ancestors, as well as our Universalist, rejected this notion.

In 1819 William Ellery Channing, the father of American Unitarianism, said, “No distinction is so great as that which is made between the elected and abandoned of God. [These] false and dishonourable views of God . . . we feel ourselves bound to resist

---

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating” (*Discussion Course on Menu for the Future*, Northwest Earth Institute, p. 24).

## First Unitarian

*A Unitarian Universalist Congregation*

*Meeting in Albuquerque, Carlsbad, East Mountains, and Socorro, New Mexico*

unceasingly.”<sup>2</sup> In this light, saying grace is not only a way of expressing gratitude, it is an act of unceasing resistance! Reclaiming the word grace, and saying grace before meals, is a way to acknowledge the *original blessing* of our human nature—a nature *worth* sustaining with good food.

I checked in with some members of the extended families in our congregation to find out what kinds of blessings or graces they use before sharing a meal together. Geri Knoebel shared that as the Penguin Family begins a meal together, each person drops a kernel of dried corn into a jar as they say what they are most grateful for. The kernels of corn become a visible reminder of the blessings they have acknowledged. They also leave an open chair at the table, in honor of those who are not present.

Martha Beyerlein of the Roadrunner Family shared a similar ritual. Everyone around the table holds hands, leaving an open space for those absent, and a designated person shares a self-composed grace.

Diane Holdridge shared that the Dragon Family sings this blessing, to the tune of the doxology:

Be present at our table, Lord.  
Be here and everywhere adored.  
These morsels bless and grant that we,  
May feast in fellowship with thee.

Leonore Abruzzo wrote that in her family, they hold hands and say, “Thank God for the abundance of food that I have been given, and for the opportunity to share it with my guests.” Additionally, she says, “Italian people also toast the wine and thank the cook.”

Toasting the wine and thanking the cook seem very do-able, but Unitarian Universalists often have a hard time praying aloud. Our struggles with this are intensified if one is not accustomed to asking a blessing or offering grace. Today’s order of service includes a variety of blessings and graces that you may find helpful. My personal favorite is this one by The Rev. Max Coats:

Let us pray to the One who holds us in the hollow of his hands,  
To the One who holds us in the curve of her arms.  
To the One whose flesh is the flesh of hills and hummingbirds  
and angleworms,  
Whose skin is the color of an old black woman and a young  
white man,  
And the color of the leopard, and the grizzly bear, and the green  
grass snake,  
Whose hair is like the aurora borealis, rainbows, nebulae,  
waterfalls, and a spider’s web,  
Whose eyes sometimes shine like the Evening Star, and then like  
fireflies,  
And then again like an open wound.  
And whose name is everyone’s, but mostly mine.  
And what shall we pray? Let us say, “Thank you.”

---

<sup>2</sup> William Ellery Channing, “Unitarian Christianity” (*Collected Works*, p. 285).

## First Unitarian

*A Unitarian Universalist Congregation*

*Meeting in Albuquerque, Carlsbad, East Mountains, and Socorro, New Mexico*

It is a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving. And it is also a long prayer to remember—and to say—especially when gathered round the table with hungry people! There is much to be said for simple blessings and graces, such as this one, which I learned from Christine:

We give thanks for being.

We give thanks for being here.

We give things for being here together.

We give thanks for being here together, sharing the fruit of the earth.

Next time we gather in the social hall for a potluck dinner, or even for coffee hour after Sunday services, what would you think if we shared such an inclusive blessing or grace, acknowledging the food, the company, and the possibilities we share?

Personally I think this would be a great practice to begin every time we share a meal together, especially with our children. Even if it is done silently, in the midst of a crowd, it is important that we take a moment to be conscious of “the lives and the world from which our food comes.” What is prepared in love, and received with consciousness and gratitude, can then be enjoyed with pleasure!

## Eat

“Eating with the fullest pleasure,” writes Wendell Berry, “is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world.”<sup>3</sup> What Berry names as the “profound enactment of our connection with the world,” I name as our intimacy with the natural world of which we are a part.

Not only is eating a matter of survival, it is a matter of intimacy that engages *all* of our senses when we take time to savor, with pleasure, the experience of good food:

We *see*, with pleasure, the colors, shapes, sizes, and textures of the variety of food at a farmer's market—from the deep purple of eggplants to the golden yellow of summer squash. There is beauty to behold in the tendrils of beanstalks, fractals anchoring the plant even as it stretches toward the sun. There is beauty to behold in the variegated and lacy curves of red leaf lettuce. In the course of one season we can bear witness to the mystery of a tiny seed, hard and black, becoming ripe flesh of deep pink watermelon by summer's end.

We *hear*, with pleasure, the crisp of an apple, just before it floods our mouth with tart sweetness. We *hear*, with pleasure, the pop of kernels of fresh sweet corn, eaten right off the cob, melted butter making its way through the hills and valleys of each sweet row of kernels.

We *smell*, with pleasure, fresh baked bread or homemade chocolate chip cookies. And we gladly suffer burnt fingertips or scorched tongues because the aromas—the aromas have compromised our better judgment, and we just cannot wait for to butter warm bread or to dunk a hot cookie in cold milk.

---

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating” (*Discussion Course on Menu for the Future*, Northwest Earth Institute, p. 24).

## First Unitarian

*A Unitarian Universalist Congregation*

*Meeting in Albuquerque, Carlsbad, East Mountains, and Socorro, New Mexico*

We **feel**, with pleasure, the rough terrain and sturdiness of a blue corn chip, confident that it will hold safe the chilis as we cover the distance from salsa bowl to mouth. We *feel*, with pleasure, the weight of several bunches of grapes, fresh picked only this morning by someone who has tended those grapevines with loving attention.

Finally we **taste** . . . we *taste* with pleasure the bitter eggplant, the buttery squash, the crisp beans, the earthy lettuce, the juicy watermelon, the tart apple, the sweet corn, the yeasty bread, the melting cookies, the creamy milk, the salty chips, the hot chilis, and the rich grapes, still warm from the morning sun that supervised their harvest.

And then, perhaps we wash it all down with clean, fresh water, elixir of life that satisfies parched throats and dry mouths, and in those instances tastes more pure and sweet than anything else we've tasted.

Food is good for us when we remember that there is more to eating than eating. It is an intimate relationship with our earth, from the first turn of the soil to the licking of our fingertips as we finish an especially good meal, savored in the company of those we love.

Good food begins with love—love of the interdependent web, and love of one another.

Prayer follows love—conscious prayers of gratitude that acknowledge the efforts and the mysteries that have brought good food, lovingly prepared, to our tables.

Eating with pleasure follows love and prayer.

With full pleasure we eat good food prepared in love and received with conscious gratitude. "In this pleasure," writes Berry, "we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend."<sup>4</sup>

We love, we pray, we eat. And, conscious of our intimate relationship with good food, and of all the ways that food is good for us, we need only say this:

Love has brought this food to our table.  
I do not take this meal for granted.  
I rejoice to savor it in the company of those I hold most dear.  
The miracles of love and life sustain me.  
In life and in love, we sustain one another.  
May it be so. Amen.

*Please join me in singing hymn #294, "Our Praise We Give."*

---

<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Pleasures of Eating" (*Discussion Course on Menu for the Future*, Northwest Earth Institute, p. 24).