

U N I T 4

FOOD AND THE ENVIRONMENT



Eating is an environmental act. No matter how insulated we might be in office cubicles and urban streets, no matter how little time we spend outdoors, each and every one of us is tied to the earth by the food we eat. The simple act of breaking bread together in church could link us to erosion problems on a wheat farm in the Midwest or pesticide poisoning among grape farmers in Chile. A quick pick-up from a fast food restaurant can put us in touch with the shrinking number of potato varieties grown in the U.S. and the excess manure produced by a factory farm. Every time we buy food, we participate in environmental degradation or support practices that sustain God's creation or, perhaps, we do some of each.

Because of the *amount* of land agriculture covers, the world's farmers play a critical role as land stewards of our current and future well-being. How we raise our food has an enormous impact on the health of our planet, especially now with more than six billion mouths to feed. While less than five percent of U.S. land is urbanized, about *one third* of our three billion acres is farm or ranch land.²¹ Agricultural water usage and waste production also have a huge impact on the environment. While California has its share of homes, golf courses, and swimming pools, agriculture consumes 83% of its water supply.²² Human waste is an environmental problem in some places, but in the U.S. farm animals produce 130 times as much manure as we do.²³

Yet farmers are only one small part of our food system: they receive less than 10 cents of every dollar you spend on groceries, and if you bought a loaf of bread this week, you paid as much for the wrapper as for the wheat in the bread.²⁴ Farming practices are shaped by the corporations who sell the seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers; who buy, process, package, ship, and market the food. They are also

shaped by *you*: the consumer. Because you eat, you occupy an honorary seat on the earth stewardship committee.

Why should Christians be especially passionate when it comes to caring about the earth and the way their food is grown? The most obvious reason is our affirmation that God created the world and that bats and wombats, tigers and tree toads, are all examples of divine creativity and delight. This fundamental Christian affirmation takes on a more profound and intriguing meaning if we apply it to our day-to-day planetary housekeeping. Habitat destruction? Species extinction? *This* is how we're treating God's creation? Should this be tolerated?

Theologian Sallie McFague suggests another reason for engagement with environmental concerns in her book, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. She claims that a Christian nature spirituality is simply Christian practice applied to the earth. "Christians are those who should love the oppressed, the most vulnerable of God's creation," she says, and in our times, it is the natural world that is sick, oppressed, and in need.²⁵ Just as 19th century Christians failed to recognize slaves as worthy people God cared about, so we need help seeing the extent of God's passionate love for other species. If we see rivers and mountains as fellow members of God's choir as they are described in Psalm 98, then earthworms and ecosystems deserve our deepest love and care.

The daily readings in this unit focus on familiar Christian virtues: hope, humility, gratitude, loving your neighbor, and intercession. Probably you see human faces when you hear such words. What would happen if we also applied these Christ-like virtues to our relationship with the earth? To the choices we make about food?

HOPE

Christians live with hope for a future that includes a redeemed creation.

Romans 8:18-27



In today's passage, Paul claims that through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christians have a basis for hope: they are given glimpses of what whole relationships with God, others, and creation look like. Because of

this, they can more easily imagine God's reign encompassing all creation at some future time. In Romans, this hope is not in a spiritual salvation in another realm; it is in a redeemed creation here on earth. All of creation is in partnership with us, longing and straining toward this hope. Hope is embedded in creation. It is evident in every sprouting seed, in every green leaf straining toward the sun; in the dependable rhythm of the seasons; even in the wood decomposing on a healthy forest floor.

In the face of environmental degradation, it is easy for us to feel cynical and hopeless. But hope is not just an emotion; it is a faith practice. We practice hope when we teach younger generations to care for the earth. We practice hope when we support businesses and nonprofits that care for the earth. We practice hope when we recognize and cherish flourishing ecosystems and healthy farming communities. Faithful action defeats despair.

When you find a farm, market, or company that demonstrates love for the earth, people, and future generations, celebrate hope. Buy their food, eat it with gusto, and thank God.

From Our Own Times

Brent and Regina Beidler, Randolph Center, VT, worked on a conventional dairy farm before they owned their own organic dairy farm and have a

healthy respect for the hard work conventional farming requires. On the conventional farm, cows were managed for maximum production. This required

three milkings a day starting at 3 a.m. and a lot of pampering with antibiotics to keep stressed cows healthy. Even with good care, today's dairy cows only last 2-3 years. The farmers were stressed as well. "A lot of people feel totally out of control when they're farming because the milk price is so beyond your control," Brent says.

When they bought their own farm, the Beidlers opted to go organic. They still work hard and experience stresses, but are pleased to sell their milk to a cooperative that pays them a fixed price, based on the cost of production. Brent and Regina are voting members of their cooperative and have input into decisions. If you live in Vermont and drink Organic Valley Milk, you might be one of their customers.

Brent and Regina also find that organic dairy farming gives them the kind of lifestyle they want. They have time for a few sidelines they really enjoy: sustainable logging with draft horses and offering sleigh rides in the winter. Also, because their farm has no dangerous machinery or chemicals, their daughter accompanied them everywhere in a backpack when she was a baby. At two, she knew each cow by name and could tell which was its stall.

Unlike cows in confinement operations, the Beidlers' cows spend warm days outdoors grazing. "It feels like you can farm with dignity," Regina says. "You look at a herd lying down together, licking each other and socializing and you say, 'This is how God created cows to be.'"

Faith in Action Step

Learn more about a farmer, store, or group with a vision for environmentally friendly food. Commit to buying their food or supporting their work. Search in your community for farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farmers, and organizations working to build a healthy, local food economy. You can also visit www.localharvest.org to search for these and other local food resources.



HUMILITY

We are not the only creatures God feeds; we are part of an intricate web of relationships.



Psalm 104:10-30

Genesis 1 is not the only account of God as creator in the Bible. Psalm 104, Psalm 65, Job 38-40, and Psalm 8 are other examples. While human beings

are given a prominent role in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, in this Psalm, as in the latter chapters of Job, humans are simply one species in the vast choir of creation. Psalm 104 describes an intricate system where all creatures are dependent on God for food. Here, the interplay between water, the landscape, and the rhythm of seasons sounds like an ecology textbook, and the human race receives no more attention than lions or wild goats. In the eyes of this hymn writer, the appropriate response to creation is not dominion but humility and praise.

Psalm 104:27-30 reminds us that we are not the only creatures God feeds. All creation is dependent on the breath of God and food from God's hands. Nor does nature exist to serve humanity; indeed most of the creatures mentioned have no economic value. Wild donkeys, wild goats, storks, and lions are all described as part of God's good creation with value independent of how they might benefit human beings. Even Leviathan, a fearsome sea monster, is not a predator or pest; it is God's plaything, formed to "sport" in the water.

The reading below describes the tiny creatures that pollinate our food. Humans can control what crops are planted, and what machinery rumbles over the earth at harvest time, but we are still totally dependent on thousands of species we barely notice. Only because these living things exist do we eat and survive.



From Our Own Times

"Recent surveys document that more than 30 genera of animals — consisting of

hundreds of species of floral visitors — are required to pollinate the 100 or so crops that feed the world. Only 15 percent of these crops are serviced by domestic honeybees; at least 80 percent are pollinated by wild bees and other wildlife. Who are the pollinators? Our recent analyses of global inventories of biodiversity indicate that more than 100,000 different animal species — perhaps as many as 200,000 — play roles in pollinating the 250,000 kinds of wild flowering plants on this planet. In addition to countless bees (the world contains an estimated 40,000 species of bees) wasps, moths, butterflies, flies, beetles, and other invertebrates, perhaps 1,500 species of vertebrates such as birds and mammals serve as pollinators. Hummingbirds are the best-known wildlife pollinators in the Americas, but perching birds, flying foxes, fruit bats, opossums, lemurs, and even geckos function as effective pollinators elsewhere in the world...

"...According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), there is an 'impending pollination crisis,' in which both wild and managed pollinators are disappearing at alarming rates owing to habitat loss, pesticide poisoning, diseases, and pests."

- Buchmann, Stephen L. and Gary Paul Nabhan. *The Forgotten Pollinators*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996.

Faith in Action Step

Spend 10 minutes several days this week watching another species eat: birds, bees, bugs, lizards, whatever. Give thanks for these creatures and reflect on the web of life that connects you. For more information on pollinators, see Center for a Livable Future, Johns Hopkins

Bloomberg School of Public Health, www.jhsph.edu/Environment/About_CLF/Canary/pollinators.html.



RECEIVING FOOD AS A GIFT FROM GOD

Food is sacred because it is a precious gift from God and from the earth.



Genesis 1:29-31

Biblical scholars spend a great deal of time debating what Genesis 1 has to say to us about being made in the image of God. They say less about what the cre-

ation story has to say about food, but this point is equally important. In Genesis 1 and elsewhere throughout the Bible, food is described as a gift from God. God provides plants for the first people to eat; rains manna and quail on the grumpy Israelites complaining in the desert; later brings them into a land flowing with milk and honey and feeds Elijah with the help of ravens, widows and angels. Jesus teaches his followers to ask God daily for bread. He also tells them not to worry about food because God feeds even the sparrows. In the biblical tradition, food is an expression of God's tenderness and affection. It is sacred because it is a gift from a lover.

Today it is harder to see God's fingerprints on the food we eat. Ninety percent of the average American's food budget is spent on processed food.²⁶ Our food comes to us packaged, stamped and dated, with a wrapper declaring who made it: Kroger or Libby or Dole or the elves at the Keebler tree house. This shift from food as gift to food as commodity affects our souls as well as our waistlines. A commodity is best bought on sale; a gift is something we receive with thanks. A commodity can be wasted, gobbled, easily replaced; a gift is treasured. When we eat whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables, we honor our bodies' needs for fiber and nutrients. We also honor God who brings these things forth from the earth. A meal fresh from the ground reminds us of the sacredness of food and of the One who provides it.



From Our Own Times

"Whaling celebrations among the In upiaq people of Barrow, Alaska, are not

commercialized festivals. Visitors to Barrow can't plan to see one. Only after the community receives the gift of the whale can the successful whaling captain declare a day of *Nalukataq*. It would be presumptuous to schedule a feast for a gift not yet received.

"When a feast day arrives, the schedule for the day is leisurely. It opens with a prayer of thanksgiving and then there is much time for visiting. Throughout the day, the whaling captain and crew distribute various parts of the whale to all who are gathered. It is a ritual sharing, not the major distribution of the many tons of meat from each whale. One flipper is simply left in the area. Anyone may carve off what they need, a practice reminiscent of the grain left in the fields for gleaners in Old Testament times.

"According to persisting ancient belief, the whale has given itself to the people of the community. The captain's gifts only reflect the whale's gift. It is a great honor to the captain and his crew for this privilege, but there is also a sense of humility — a recognition of being gifted. Tourists privileged to participate in this ancient ritual are always surprised that everything is free. No one buys or sells any meat — that is strictly forbidden. The whaling festival revolves around giving and sharing."

- From James E. Roghair, "The Gift of the Whale: Community as Steward," unpublished master's thesis, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL, 2000.

Faith in Action Step



Buy five foods that remind you that food is a gift from God. Eat them with relish and respect. Then research your options: where is the best place to buy unprocessed, whole foods? Is there a farmers' market in your town, or a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farmer nearby?

LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

The people who grow and pick our food are our neighbors.



Mark 12:28-34

When Jesus taught that loving God was the greatest commandment, he was offering one of his most uncontroversial pieces of advice. Loving God with all

your heart was the center of the *Shema*, a prayer from Deuteronomy 6 that Jews recited daily. To love your neighbor as yourself is a little more challenging. Even more challenging is the lawyer's question in Luke's version of this story (Luke 10:25-37). "Who is my neighbor?" he wonders. As Jesus' story about the good Samaritan illustrates, the answer is not always obvious. One could argue that the creatures of the earth are our neighbors, or even those generations yet unborn who will inherit our environmental sins.

If Jesus were alive today, he likely would embrace farm workers as neighbors. Every day, we eat food that invisible hands have picked, processed, and packed. Even in the U.S., 85 percent of fruits and vegetables are hand cultivated and/or hand harvested. This is lowest paid occupation in the country. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, three out of five farm worker households in the U.S. live in poverty and three quarters of all farm workers earn less than \$10,000 per year.²⁷ Farm workers also face risks to their health from farm machinery and agricultural poisons. According to the World Health Organization, about "one million serious, unintentional pesticide poisonings take place globally every year, with millions of additional milder cases likely."²⁸

The scribe in Mark 12:33 who observes that loving one's neighbor is more important than offering burnt sacrifices raises another interesting question. How and when are our charitable contributions underwritten by injustice? If cheap food grown at the expense of the future fertility of the land and harvested by the poor enables us to give away surplus money and get tax deductions, would God be pleased?



From Our Own Times

Fair Trade is a growing approach to trade that has its roots in the development

efforts of several church organizations. The model relies on informed consumers, honest and fair trade relationships, and cooperative principles. Below are internationally recognized fair trade standards as described on the website of Equal Exchange, an organization that sells coffee, tea, cocoa, and chocolate.

Pay a Fair Price: A fair price includes a guaranteed minimum price regardless of how low the commodity market falls. This ensures farmers a living wage even when market prices are too low to maintain acceptable living standards.

Work with Democratically Run Cooperatives: Partners are small farmer co-ops that are governed by the farmers themselves. They are dedicated to sharing income fairly and providing services such as healthcare and education for their members.

Buy Direct: Buying directly means that the benefits and profits from trade actually reach the farmers and their communities, not the middlemen.

Provide Advance Credit: Traditionally, credit was either unavailable or only offered at exorbitant interest rates that kept farmers trapped in debt. Fair trade organizations make vital credit available to farmers.

Encourage Ecologically Sustainable Farming Practices: Sustainable farming helps build a long-term economic base for farmers while protecting their communities, the environment, and consumers from dangerous chemicals.



Faith in Action Step

Switch to fair trade coffee and tea or take the first step toward switching your congregation over to fair trade. Visit the Interfaith Program of Equal Exchange www.equalexchange.com for more information.

INTERCESSION

Concerns related to earth care belong in our prayers and worship services.

Mark 2:1-12



Mark's account of the paralyzed man with four friends is one of the most colorful healing stories in the Bible. How four people managed to get up on a roof hauling a stretcher is hard to imagine, but it must have involved a good deal of

grunting and sweating. This is a fitting description of intercession — the act of bringing the needs of others before God.

Although going through a roof to find healing is exceptional, interceding for sick friends is something many churches do well. Parishioners faithfully call upon their pastors to share urgent medical concerns in worship services or through e-mail prayer chains. Unfortunately, this kind of prayerful attention is rarely extended to our other sick friends — the pieces of the natural world that are quietly disintegrating around us.

Reshaping our worship services and communal life so that they might receive intercessions on behalf of the earth requires an imaginative leap and a bit of courage. Mark's story offers us both. What would happen if we borrowed this text as a metaphor for intercessory prayer on behalf of the earth? What if we collectively carried the sick pieces of our planet into our gathered communities and offered them up to God?

From Our Own Times



What does sick land look like? Below is a beginner's guide to intercession for the earth. When you see these things, know that human agriculture is taking a toll on surrounding ecosystems.

Muddy rivers: Historically, rivers ran clear, even after a

rain. Trees and other vegetation along riverbanks held the soil in place; wetlands soaked up excess

water and released it slowly, preventing rapid runoff. Farming practices that contribute to soil erosion include farming too close to a river without a buffer zone, not leaving enough vegetation on a field to hold the soil after it is harvested, or farming slopes without using proper contour techniques.

Monocultures: Most of us think of “the country” as a series of lush, green, rolling cornfields. What looks like “nature” to us is not at all natural, and more like a factory than an ecosystem. A single crop sucks the same nutrients out of the soil year after year and is a bonanza for that crop's pests. In contrast, a healthy ecosystem is a tangled and diverse interconnected web where plants and insects, pests and predators, help solve each other's problems. Organic farmers capitalize on this by planting several crops side by side and diversifying their operations.

Missing farms: If you live in an urban area, do you see verdant plots of farmland in your city, reserved for growing food for local people? Is your grocery store raising tomatoes on the roof? Can you find a farmer's market? Most cities do not organize their lives this way, and urban sprawl is replacing U.S. farmland at a rate of about three million acres a year.²⁹

Faith in Action Step



Look for the above symptoms in your area. When you see them, take a moment to pray for the ecosystems in your local community. Share a concern you see with your faith community.

Unit 4: Food and the Environment

MORE FAITH IN ACTION STEPS

1. What food issues related to the environment make you feel helpless? Tell at least one other person about your concerns and then place your list in the hands of God in some symbolic way. Watch for signs of hope in response.
2. How is organic farming different from conventional farming? The following websites may be helpful as you research organic methods: www.agroecology.org/ and www.rodaleinstitute.org. The largest three seed firms are DuPont, Monsanto, and Syngenta. The top agrochemical corporations are Syngenta, Monsanto, and Bayer. See their websites to learn more about agriculture from an industrial agriculture perspective. For photos comparing organic farms with industrial farms, see *Fatal Harvest* listed in the bibliography.
3. Many people argue that the cost of organic and/or locally grown food makes it impractical or beyond their reach. Use Resources 4-1 to help you count the cost of switching to organic foods. Do comparison shopping in your own community and figure out the cost per month. What compromises or lifestyle changes would you need to make to buy organic/locally grown foods? To consistently buy *one* food locally?
4. If you garden, plant heirloom seeds this year. Heirloom varieties are known for their taste and preserve genes lost from varieties bred for shipping and storing. Find a merchant of heirloom seeds in or near your bioregion at www.halcyon.com/tmend/links.htm.
5. Make a fruit or vegetable centerpiece for your table one day this week. Revel in the colors, shapes, textures. Try to describe or draw your creation.
6. Cruise the Pesticide Action Network website www.panna.org to find out how pesticides affect farm workers. Learn about the National Farm Worker Ministry at www.nfwm.org.
7. Interview local farmers. What are their experiences running a farm? Is it economically viable? What are the biggest challenges? If you can't find a farmer, interview a person who grew up on a farm.
8. Ask your grocery store manager or the owner of your favorite restaurant about their food sources. Businesses will sell what customers ask for. See the Eater's Bill of Rights and questions at the National Catholic Rural Life Conference site, www.ncrlc.com.
9. Raise an earth-related concern in your congregation's worship or sharing time, in a Christian education hour, or over a meal with friends. See www.earthministry.org for ideas.
10. Some churches are full of generic representations of nature paired with spiritual sayings on posters or with worship songs on PowerPoint slides. Caring for the earth is not a generic activity: it requires knowledge of, and loyalty to, a particular place. Replace some of these images with photographs taken in your own area. Include photos of locally grown crops.

(Continued on next page . . .)

MORE HEALTHY EATING TIPS

1. This week when you go grocery shopping, select organic and locally grown foods that more accurately reflect what it costs to grow food in healthy ways. Splurge on hormone-free milk, pasture-fed eggs or those organic salad greens you don't normally buy because they are too expensive. Serve a meal highlighting these "luxuries." Did paying more break your budget or increase your respect for the food you eat?
2. Resource 2-5 offers a chart of fruits and vegetables indicating those foods most likely to contain pesticides. Review this chart and shop accordingly.
3. Farmers' markets frequently offer offbeat local foods you can't find in a grocery store: Jerusalem artichokes, black tomatoes, ground cherries, elderberry jelly, and so on. Shop at a farmer's market this week and experiment with one new fruit or vegetable.
4. If you have children, have fun with a fruits and vegetables contest. Give prizes for the greatest number of servings of fruits and vegetables in a day's or week's time; the greatest variety of plants consumed; the bravest attempt to try something new.
5. Learn why pasture raised meat is healthier and better for the environment at the Grace Factory Farm Project at www.factoryfarm.org and www.eatwild.com and also find a source in your area.
6. Review Resources 2-1 to 2-6 and choose another area to work on this week.