

Food justice as peacemaking
Ezekiel 34:17-31
Toronto United Mennonite Church
November 10, 2019

Visiting my parents this summer our four year old was puzzling over his glass of milk. We had explained that the milk would taste different than the fresh milk we get from our goats every morning before breakfast. He asked, Grandpa, do you have a cow? No, grandpa said, I don't have a cow. I bought the milk from the store. Willem thought longer, and said, well does the store have a cow? And we found ourselves explaining the whole system of milk production that brings milk conveniently to our tables. He found it all very complicated.

All food has a story. It's not something we think about typically. In our city, grocery shelves burst with every kind of food imaginable and at any time of the year. Ripe tomatoes and almost ripe avocados, perfect bananas, crisp lettuce, shiny apples, chicken attractively prepared on mess-less trays and wrapped in clear plastic, soft, fresh bread, fresh milk, cheese, sour cream, butter. To say nothing of all those carefully designed boxes and bags in the middle aisles, coffee in vacuum packs, peanut butter, cereal, prepared foods to make supper time prep that much easier. All at our fingertips, provided we have enough coin in our pockets to pay for it. If we don't it's trickier, and that's another story altogether.

But it all comes from somewhere doesn't it? Before we choose our purchases, set down our dollar bills, place them in our reusable bags and carry them home. It all has a story.

This banana, for example, was harvested from a tree that was planted on a large banana plantation in Costa Rica, planted, tended and harvested by workers who aren't paid very much and are exposed to harmful chemicals when the trees are sprayed with pesticides. Some of these workers are trying to start families of their own but can't because exposure to these chemicals have caused them to be sterile. That's another story. The chemicals, by the way, tend to wash into waterways, and have impacted populations of crocodiles and fish. That's another story. Back to this banana. It was picked green with it's bunch so that it could survive for 5 weeks before it got to our store. The big bunch was cut apart into smaller bunches, and packed onto refrigerated shipping containers that travelled the distance to a major shipping port. At some point ethylene was pumped through the container to stimulate artificial ripening, and the bananas were distributed to individual stores and finally reached the store where I purchased this particular banana and brought it home.

I wonder whose hands cut this banana from that tree. I wonder what she prepared for her own family for supper. I wonder if he eats bananas. I wonder who owns the plantation where this banana was grown. I wonder how wealthy he is. I wonder if he even lives in Costa Rica.

Think of it! Every item in the grocery store has a story, the banana story times a million. It all comes from somewhere, has been handled and prepared by a someone, and the producing of it has had some impact on the earth in which was grown. Each item takes its place in a massive food industry that is in place to bring food to people for affordable prices. It's hard to think of it.

Affordable prices. I once saw a fully cooked roasted chicken on sale for \$5.99. I wouldn't have given it a thought before we raised our own chickens and did our own calculations. We figure, without any fancy nonGMO organic food, that our base costs, our monetary outlay, to raise single chicken for 8 weeks is about \$10. That doesn't include our infrastructure - the coop, the feeder, the heat lamp, it doesn't include our daily labour of watering and feeding, or the work of butchering, or the processing or packaging for the freezer. It certainly doesn't include food preparation, spices and seasonings, putting it the oven, or packaging to bring it for sale. What is the story behind a fully cooked roasted chicken on sale for \$5.99? It's impossible that the story of a roast chicken on sale for \$5.99 doesn't depend on injustice of some kind, on multiple fronts. Better perhaps not to wonder.

But I've also been the person scrounging for the .59 cents I could scrape together from found coins and searched the discounted vegetable shelves at No Frills to find something not too spoiled to feed my kids. I've been grateful for chickens at \$5.99.

Something's wrong with our food system when the stories of our beautiful, affordable food almost always conceal a hidden cost of injustice to someone, to the earth.

We haven't even asked yet - who is it that has food, and who doesn't? And why don't they? We haven't asked why it is that a basket of food in a northern Indigenous community costs three times as much as the same basket in Toronto. We haven't asked yet who is growing and selling food, and who isn't? Why are family farms disappearing? We haven't wondered yet how indigenous peoples lived for centuries in harmony with the land that sustained them? We haven't noticed how industrialized food production is doing the opposite, stripping the earth and plundering and poisoning its goodness. We haven't asked yet who has access to locally grown nutritious food and who doesn't, or rather who can afford it. Who has food security - a reliable source of food, and the ability to access it - and who doesn't. Who has food sovereignty - the ability and means to produce their own food - and who doesn't. It's easier not to listen for the stories, for we may begin to discern patterns of racism, patriarchy and colonialism at work, systems in which we may have to admit our own complicity. Whose hands are doing the work anyway? Whose pockets are lined?

Mennonite Central Committee has many projects addressing food security and food sovereignty - food growing programs in northern Indigenous communities, responding to needs articulated by First Nations in the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission report. Programs in Ethiopia to build up and preserve soil depleted by flooding as a result of climate change. Supporting the building of an irrigation canal in Haiti that allows farmers to water their crops and feed their families despite unpredictable rainfall and drought. MCC is in the business of building food sovereignty. I encourage you to learn about these programs and give to them, as one way to build peace through food justice.

"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden down, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?"
Ezekiel 34:18-19.

Jerusalem has finally fallen, its inhabitants scattered throughout the land. After a whole prophetic book railing against both Israel and its enemies, this, believe it or not, is the beginning of Ezekiel's words of hope for the future. Here begins God's plan of restoration, and it can't begin without clearing some things up. It has to do with food.

"Must my sheep eat what you have trodden down and drink what you have fouled with your feet." This food has a story.

I'm struck here that Ezekiel is differentiating between sheep and sheep - fat sheep and malnourished sheep, but all sheep nonetheless. God, through

Ezekiel has other words for the shepherds, the ones who, in his estimation, have caused the downfall of Jerusalem in the first place. To them God says, "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should you not feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, you do not feed the sheep! You have not strengthened the weak ones, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost...so they were scattered because there was no shepherd. My sheep were scattered, they wandered all over the mountains, my sheep were scattered all over the face of the earth with no one to search for them." Ezekiel 34:3-6. Ok so the whole thing was caused by an abject failure of leadership. God says, move over, I'll take it from here, there are *still* some things I need to clear up, and God turns to the sheep themselves.

Even among the sheep there is inequality. "You pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide but I will save my flock." (21-22). And here they are, the strong ones taking the choicest pasture drinking the clearest water and ruining the rest for the others so they remain weak and malnourished.

Animals will do this- shun the weakest to prevent them from getting the best food. But the trampling of the pasture or the fouling of the water? Is that malicious or simply unthinking? Having children often at our

homestead I find myself watching their feet. Treading on newly planted rows, or splashing into the pond, disturbing a glob of jellied frog eggs - these joyful and uncareful feet wreak havoc without thinking. It takes some quick intervention to raise their awareness so their dancing feet take them elsewhere.

Mary Jo Leddy showed us last week how the difference between the Good Samaritan and the priests who passed by the injured man on the road was a willingness to draw near. That's my challenge to us today as well. Draw near enough to hear the stories, so that we can make choices that do not tread on the pasture or foul the water, and with our choices, lift the stories for others to hear. Food justice is complicated and feels unsolvable. And we can begin by coming close to the stories, and finding connection with the land and the hands that labour. noticing where we put our feet that we may muddy less the waters. In doing so we increase our gratitude and honour the source of all life.

Let me tell you the stories of the food that is on the table set out for you today.

The honey was produced in hives tended by Henry Braun, father of Damaris Schmucker.

The apples were picked from the ground by our neighbour, Leewin, and given to us a little bruised from the fall but otherwise perfectly fine. They

were cut and dried in our home. The chickens feasted on the peels and cores.

The cheese was made from milk produced by our goats, collected over several days. Our kids Ezra and Ani likely did some of the milking. Scottie, one of the goats has a sore hoof, which I tend daily.

The bread was made with pumpkins planted and harvested on the Schmuckers' farm, baked into bread by Ginny Lepp.

The grapes for the juice were tended by Ken Cornies and Shauna Heide, who pruned the vines, harvested the grapes and processed them into juice.

The resources required for this symbolic meal are almost entirely as follows: time, effort and commitment, skill, access to land and cookware, a kind neighbour, a joyful generosity, and community.

This food is God's sacred gift. Thanks be to God.