Faithful eating

Where all have a place at the table

BY RYAN P. CUMMING

THE QUESTION IN MY EMAIL inbox was one of the oddest I had received as a food systems educator: "How did a plastic box of Brussels sprouts destined for a grocery store in the northeastern U.S. end up on a discount table at a farmer's market in the Bay Area of California?" The answer to that question opens a doorway into the complexity of our food systems, as well as the relationship many of us have with food. It's a key concern for Christians.

Food—like water—is essential for life and a sign of our relationship with creation and the Creator. In a way, the story of God's relationship with God's people is a story of food—both physical and spiritual. In the beginning, God plants a rich garden of foods. Of course, the first sin involves eating a forbidden food. What is the final act of the Hebrews as they leave slavery in Egypt? A meal. The focus of many laws for God's people? Food. Naomi and Ruth's reason for returning to Bethlehem (and for leaving in the first place)? Food. What do Jesus and the twelve disciples do the last time they are together? Share food. God's promise in Revelation? Plenty of food. What previous work experience did leaders of the faith, such as Moses, David and Amos, have? Serving as shepherds and food producers. Food is central to our stories, experiences and expressions of faith. Food reminds us that we are dependent on God and connected to one another and to all of creation.

The problem is, we don't like to be reminded that we are dependent or connected. Our refusal of dependence and connectedness is one way that Lutherans understand sin. Sin is an inward turning and the temptation to believe that we must do it all on our own—or even that we can do it all on our own. Our nation tends to celebrate independence, rugged individualism and the "self-made" person. We valorize those who conquer nature, rather than the people who humbly recognize their dependence on it.

And it's not just the stories we tell; it's also the systems we create. Food systems in the U.S. and much of the world are designed to detach us from the sources of our food and disconnect us from the land, water, soil and people who provide it. Like the letter writer who wondered about the path of those Brussel sprouts, we often know very little about where our food comes from, let alone the labor and input that produced it. Our interpersonal encounters as we obtain food are less likely to involve a farmer and more likely to involve a retailer (or nowadays, a self-checkout machine). Today, far fewer people are directly involved in farming.

There have been some benefits, of course: greater efficiency and corporatization of our food systems, for example. But the costs are steep. While many people in the Global North enjoy a more varied diet throughout the year, countries throughout the Global South have been forced to use their arable land to produce commodity crops for export, instead of growing crops to feed their own communities. As we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, this efficiency comes at the cost of resilience. With fewer, larger suppliers providing so much of our food, shutdowns and slowdowns at corporate processing facilities left grocery shelves empty. At the same time, smaller, local farms with plenty of livestock and crops were essentially locked out of a food system designed for larger producers.

Perhaps the greatest costs are revealed in the deep woundedness of creation. In the U.S., as many as 90 percent of streams and more than 90 percent of fish in developed watersheds are contaminated by pesticides, according to a U.S. Geological Survey assessment (http://tinyurl.com/bdh2cd55). Research shows that food systems contribute a third of greenhouse gas emissions, driving climate change around the world. Yet some experience the effects of climate change more than others. Consumers in wealthy, developed countries reap the rewards of cheap, readily available foods at supermarkets. However, people in low-income countries face greater risks of climate change, such as vulnerability to extreme weather events and the loss of arable land, despite having fewer resources to adapt to a changing climate. As

the 2023 ELCA social message "Earth's Climate Crisis" states: "One of the greatest injustices wreaked by climate change is how, across the globe, those living in poverty have contributed the least to produce it and yet bear its greatest consequences."

Farmers and farmworkers are also frequently the victims of the injustice of the food system, working in dangerous conditions and bearing the financial burdens of changing growing seasons, heavier rainfall, and unpredictable frost-thaw cycles. The ELCA social message notes that farmworkers die of heat stress at a rate 20 times higher than the national average. That risk is only increasing as temperatures rise due to climate change. They are caught in a system that produces injustice, environmental harm, and poor health outcomes, even as it promises greater variety and distribution of foods at lower costs.

This flies in the face of who we are and who we are called to be. Faithfully participating in the food system means recognizing our dependence on God and on neighbors who produce food, as well as our interdependence with all of creation. It also seeks justice for farmers and farmworkers, especially by protecting their rights to fair compensation and safety.

As Norman Wirzba points out, "Faithful eating begins when we recognize that food is not ever cheap." There is always a cost, even if we don't immediately recognize it.

EAT LOCAL?

One way to reduce costs, some say, is to buy local foods that travel shorter distances. Yet food miles actually account for a relatively small amount of emissions in the food system—about 5 percent of greenhouse gas emissions related to a household's food. What is more, research has found that the carbon footprint of food transportation is actually greater with local food, since less of it is transported at a time. That means that eating locally may have, at best, a minimal impact on the environment and, at worst, may actually increase the environmental impact of food.

That said, anthropologists and food justice advocates Teresa M. Mares and Devon G. Peña point out that food is "more than just a nutritional commodity but rather a set of social relations and cultural practices." They believe that considering our "footprint" means considering not just "our carbon footprint [but also] the broader societal and cultural footprints that we leave behind." (See *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, The MIT Press, 2011, available at http://tinyurl.com/3fnb6j4k.)

Doing this "deep" analysis means recognizing that eating locally can empower local producers, especially those who have been marginalized, and foster the creation of a deeper sense of place. This can reorient us, as consumers and producers, away from the de-personalized global food system and toward a more just—and more human—rootedness where we are, and in who we are. Eating local won't fundamentally change our environmental impact. But eating local can help foster more just, interdependent and interconnected relationships at the table.

REDUCE WASTE

One way we can significantly impact our environment is to reduce our food waste. One-third of the total emissions related to U.S. diets come from food waste, and that doesn't even include the emissions that come from disposing of waste (Learn more at http://tinyurl.com/2dtzttzf).

This is not so much about having to toss rancid leftovers from our fridge, as it is about what foods we buy and want to buy at stores. Those pre-packaged Brussel sprouts in California exist in the way they do because we demand convenience and uniformity with our food—a resource that is neither convenient nor uniform by nature. Most likely, the Brussel sprouts ended up at a farmer's market instead of a grocery store because grocery packages must be a uniform weight. During shipment quality control, a few packages are weighed by an inspector. If enough of them fail the test, the whole shipment is rejected and either disposed of or sold in other locations—locations that may not be able to use them. Similarly, the consistent color and size of fruits and vegetables at the

supermarket isn't an accident. If a crop ready for harvest doesn't meet the quality standards for the retailer, they may not even be harvested due to the cost. They are often left in a field to rot—the wrong color or size, but nonetheless edible and, sadly, wasted.

We can use our power as consumers to purchase more "ugly" foods and reduce our reliance on pre-packaged fruits and vegetables. These are first steps to reduce environmental harm and recognize our dependence on a creation that we steward, but cannot, without substantial costs, control.

VOTE

The last step we can take has nothing to do with what we put on our plate and everything to do with what we put on a ballot. Our food is not just a product of nutrients and organic matter but of laws and policies around food production, food-related labor, land, natural resources, technology, and more. The U.S. Farm Bill, for instance, provides insurance, price controls, and subsidies for farmers, some of which protect farmers from the unexpected and others that can help farmers and food producers to innovate with more sustainable technologies. Advocating for increased funding, especially funding for innovation and sustainability, is a key way to support more just food systems and the people who make them possible. This reflects what we know by faith, namely that we are interconnected parts of a creation that includes producers, consumers, flora, fauna, soil, water and the land. Becoming a faithful eater means becoming a faithful advocate for policies that make it possible for us to be just in our food production and food consumption.

Food as "daily bread for the health of the world" demands of us, as people of faith, responsible stewardship of the gifts we have received in creation. It calls to us, out of our faith, to understand food for what it is, namely a sign of our dependence and interdependence, the "stuff" that unites us with loved ones around a table and as neighbors around the world. To eat faithfully is to celebrate this interdependence and to work for food systems that provide sufficiently and sustainably for all creation. More than that, the call to be faithful eaters is an invitation to be part of God's work in building a world where all creation is fed—and all have a place at the table.

LEARN MORE

The following resources can help us live out our call to be responsible stewards of creation. Check out:

- A free, downloadable study guide for "Earth's Climate Crisis," an ELCA social message, https://elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society#Studydocs
- *Earth's Climate Crisis*, an ELCA social message, http://tinyurl.com/4du4ttp8
- *A Framework for Assessing Effects of the Food System*, http://tinyurl.com/55rpbujp
- *Faithful Eating* by Norman Wirzba (Center for Christian Ethics, 2012) available at http://tinyurl.com/232bavxw.
- *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011) available at http://tinyurl.com/3fnb6j4k
- *Food systems are responsible for a third of global anthropogenic GHG emissions*, Crippa, M., Solazzo, E., Guizzardi, D., Monforti-Ferrario, F., Tubiello, F. N., & Leip, A. (Nature Food 2021) available at http://tinyurl.com/food-greenhouse-emissions