

I'm a long-time *Simpsons* lover. Yes, they've been pretty inconsistent in the last decade or so, but when their satire is on point, it's *on point*. I particularly enjoy when *The Simpsons* skewers religion. Take this clip, for instance: [VIDEO - Bart's Prayer].

That clip is funny because the prayer before a meal is still a cultural institution, but what Bart says rings true to how we live, and how we think theologically about food. We *love* food - Americans eat more than any other nation by a large margin.

Our relationship with food is complicated - though fewer and fewer families actually sit down to the dinner table, food is still a social event for many of us (we've just moved it to restaurants, especially millennials). For others of us, food is more like fuel - you're busy, always on the go go go, and you need calories to keep moving.

Either way, fewer and fewer of us are sitting down at the dinner table. We eat at restaurants, in our cars, in front of the TV, but rarely together at the table. No wonder, then, we don't think theologically about our food.

It sounds a little silly to suggest we might think of food as spiritual. When we think about our food, we care about three things - how good it tastes, how much there is, and how much it cost. In other words, we care a lot about the food that's on our plate.

[**Disconnected from Earth**] We care a lot less about how our food *got to* our plates and pantries. Rewind the clock 70 years and most Americans were farmers or children of farmers. Our connection to the land, to the source of our food was immediate. But over the last three generations or so, we've been increasingly disconnected from where our food comes from. Fewer and fewer of us know our farmers or grow our own food. Our food comes from shelves, in packages, thoroughly disconnected from the farms and factories where it's made.

This disconnection is why Bart's prayer is so funny (and cutting). Though we might give lip service to God as our provider, when our food comes from shelves or servers, paid for with cards and cash, it's *difficult* to feel as though God is the one providing it. It sure feels like *we're* the ones providing it for ourselves.

Our diets are disconnected from creation and therefore the creator. Because that relationship is disrupted, our relationship with food has become unhealthy, toxic and sinful.

Most of us know by now the ethical problems with the way we eat (and what we eat) - that America has an obesity problem, that we have higher rates of diabetes and heart disease. Many of us are already aware too that our current farming practices aren't sustainable, that the way we raise and slaughter the animals we eat is decidedly inhumane. If you're like me, you love meat so you haven't looked too deeply into any of this because I still want to enjoy my food and not feel guilty when I eat.

Food shouldn't be a source of guilt and shame. Our tables offer a daily opportunity for us to claim grace and hope. Our dinner tables are ignored invitations from God to enter more deeply into a life of faith. If we're willing to come to our tables as God's table, we'll find life, beauty and power. The table can be a source of hope, the most basic place where we can create daily space to embrace our God-given calling.

The table is our daily chance to taste and see that God is good. To experience food as more than fuel, but as actual grace from God.

We don't imagine that our mealtime habits form us into a certain kind of person. It's hard for us to believe that the grocery store shapes us to think and act in predictable (and unhealthy) ways. So how can we learn to see the toxic practices we've developed concerning our food?

Today is the first Sunday of the church season called Lent. Lent is a season in which we prepare for Easter by confessing sin and repenting, turning away from that which brings death toward the God who gives life. This year, our series is called System Failure. We're considering Sin not as individual bad actions individuals do, but as the larger patterns of death and injustice we all engage in. We're practicing recognizing the atmosphere of sin that we're born into, that we begin breathing from our first moments. In Lent, we're learning to see how Sin poisons us, stunts our growth and robs us of life.

We can call these big patterns of sin institutional sins - the New Testament calls the "powers and principalities". Institutions are cultural artifices so deeply ingrained in "the way things are" that most of us never notice them, let alone think to question whether they're good or bad.

[Ash Wed air valve graphic] On Ash Wednesday, we saw that faith can function in two ways. Religion can act as an air valve that lets us continue to participate in these big sins - like praying over a meal can make us feel better about not worrying where our food comes from. But faith can also mobilize us to resist these sins, to be a counter-community who embodies a better way - the way of God's Life. We can form better, holier, life-giving habits.

So let me offer two words of warning: first, these big institutional sins feel overwhelming. By the time you get a handle on what's going on, it's easy to feel completely defeated, as though there's no hope. But the good news of Lent is that Easter is coming, that God has overcome these institutional sins, too, and that God invites us to overcome them by participating in Jesus' life. Each week, we'll have some simple, practical ways to resist these big sins.

The other warning I want to give is that not every person will feel equally passionate about each sin we investigate. We've been talking at Catalyst for several months now about calling - that calling is what we find at the intersection of our loves and the needs we perceive in the world. So during this series, prayerfully listen to how the Spirit is calling you to engage these issues. Some people today will be gripped by this issue of food. Others will not find it as compelling. That's okay. We have six weeks (and trust me - even then we're only scratching the surface).

For the next six weeks, listen to how the Spirit is calling you. Pay attention to which sins are particularly heartbreaking. You won't be able to do everything. But all of us can do something.

Now, back to food. How can we reclaim the dinner table as a source of grace, hope and power? What practices can form us to be a people connected to God and to creation through the very food we eat? [Scripture Slide] If you have a Bible, turn with me to Deuteronomy 26. As you're turning there, Deuteronomy is a recounting of Israel's final days before entering the Promised Land. Two generations before, Israel lived as slaves in Egypt. Under Moses' leadership, they left Egypt and have spent the last 40 years living as nomads in the desert between Egypt and Israel. Throughout this time, nearly their only source of food has been manna, a bread-like substance God caused to appear every morning.

Every day for the last 40 years, the Israelites had food to eat because God provided it day by day.

But now, they're about to settle the land God promised them. They're not going to be nomads anymore, but farmers. Their food will come not from God's daily provision, but from the sweat of their backs. Which is as dangerous as it is exciting, because humans are forgetful. As farmers, Israel is no less dependent on God than they were as nomads - they require rains, sun, protection from blight and insects.

But when we're putting in the work, we forget that we depend on God. God knew this, knew that the beauty of the Promised Land was also a danger. So what did God do? God instituted a *practice*, a behavior designed to shape the imaginations and beliefs of the people. Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

“When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you as a special possession and you have conquered it and settled there, put some of the first produce from each crop you harvest into a basket and bring it to the designated place of worship—the place the Lord your God chooses for his name to be honored. Go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, ‘With this gift I acknowledge to the Lord your God that I have entered the land he swore to our ancestors he would give us.’ The priest will then take the basket from your hand and set it before the altar of the Lord your God.

“You must then say in the presence of the Lord your God, ‘My ancestor Jacob was a wandering Aramean who went to live as a foreigner in Egypt. His family arrived few in number, but in Egypt they became a large and mighty nation. When the Egyptians oppressed and humiliated us by making us their slaves, we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors. He heard our cries and saw our hardship, toil, and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and powerful arm, with overwhelming terror, and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey! And now, O Lord, I have brought you the first portion of the harvest you have given me from the ground.’ Then place the produce before the Lord your God, and bow to the ground in worship before him.

Afterward you may go and celebrate because of all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household. Remember to include the Levites and the foreigners living among you in the celebration. -- Deuteronomy 26:1-11

God institutes a harvest ritual. Every year, when the first crops ripen, when you can see exactly what sort of harvest you're in for, collect those fruits and give them to God. And when you bring them, you have to tell the story of how God rescued you out of slavery and brought you to the Promised Land.

You stand before the priest, holding the first fruits of your harvest and you say, "I brought these for God, because I wouldn't be here without God's help." And then you go party (and your party includes *everyone*, even the strangers.)"

For Israel, the abundance of the Promised Land was proof of God's grace, goodness and rescue. When they ate the crops of their harvest, they were tasting God's tangible love and real provision. But they could forget - they would forget, just like we all forget. So God instituted a ritual, a practice, surrounding the harvest. The people were to tell the story of what the Promised Land means, over and over, so they remember that what they're tasting is God's goodness and mercy.

The difference between an entitled Israel and a grateful Israel was the practice of remembering. The difference between food as fuel and food as grace is the practice of pausing, of saying thank you.

So what does that mean for us? The vast majority of us aren't farmers anymore. Halloween is as close as we get to a Harvest Festival and it's about candy, not corn (and definitely not candy corn because those are tiny abominations). So how do we apply this text to 21st century suburban America?

We don't get our food from the farm - we get it from the grocery store. And it's important to note that the grocery store (and the restaurant and all the other food sellers) want to disconnect us from the Earth. How can we tell that? Because of how they are laid out. How many of you knew grocery stores are laid out strategically? The basic rule: the more necessary an item is, the further back in the store it is. Where are milk and eggs? At the back. Bread? usually near the back. Pastas and sauces? Back. Chips and soda? Front. Candy? Right by the check stand. Even individual shelves are strategic. The most popular brands are at eye-level, with the local or gourmet brands at the top for flavor. And where are the kid-friendly brands? Down where kids can see them, of course!

Does it matter? Yes, quite a lot. On average, 2/3 of what we buy in a grocery store we had no intention of buying when we walked in. The stores are designed to get us to buy more. Which tells us clearly what our role is: consumer.

Consumer. A word that means to eat, to take in. The grocers don't care if we savor our food. They don't care if we're grateful for it, only that we pay for it. What's advertised in the stores? The *price* of the food. What are you promised if you get a Kroger card or Tom Thumb tag on your keys? Savings!

[**Nutrition Label**] Stores don't want you to think about nutrition (the actual purpose of food!). That's why the nutrition information is presented in the most boring, least helpful way possible. Because the food industry is about the most food for the cheapest price.

That's bad for us all the way around - from the grocery stores backward to the people who make our food and forward to our dinner plates. Probably the most passionate person I know on this issue is our friend Brad Bloomer, who recently started his own farm to address many of these issues. I spoke to Brad about this issue, and what those of us who like me are *not* going to go start a farm can do. Take a look.

[[Interview with Brad: 1. Why is our food so cheap? Why is that bad? What can regular people do to eat more justly?](#)]

Friends, the food industry wants to reduce us to consumers who need fuel to keep buying. The food industry is agnostic, and it doesn't want us to connect our food back to God because when we pause and remember where our food comes from, we begin to ask questions about how it got to us, and how it's affecting us.

This is why the table matters. Why a practice like the mealtime prayer is life-giving. When we pause before we eat, We are transformed from consumers into children of God, recipients of grace. Prayer reconnects us to God, reminds us that we didn't earn this ourselves, that we're not providing solely for ourselves.

Change begins by remembering who we are - we are children of the God of all creation, the maker of heaven and earth.

Let's reclaim the dinner table as a site of special grace from God. Let's be a people formed by grace to be gracious.

## **Communion Set Up**