

## FOOD: MORE THAN YOU WANTED TO KNOW

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I think of myself as a vegetarian. And ninety-nine percent of the time I am. But, as my best friend Mark will be more than happy to tell you, that is not exactly true. He knows me well enough that I am one part enlightened, but I am two parts Neanderthal.

Once Wass, as I call him, got wind of the fact that I have a weak spot for the Burger King Drive Through, and he catches me in any mention of me refusing to eat meat, he will ask in his dismissive voice, "Hey Wil—feeling vegetarian today." Jerk! He says it because he knows that having my little hypocrisy exposed, if only to myself, this really pushes my buttons.

And, he's right. But, in a way, so am I. Because considering myself a vegetarian, even though I am not a perfect one, seems to help me eat a lot less meat. Truth is, I probably eat a burger once every four months. Shoot me!

So, for all those squirming in their seats that you are about to get roasted— get it, "roasted"—know that if your speaker today is weak-willed, he is a bit firm-minded on this. To me the very idea of eating meat is truly both disgusting and tempting. I like it. I snuck a few pieces of turkey at our Friendsgiving Dinner when nobody was looking.

I made peace with this sermon in two ways— first by sharing my hypocrisy about this, and second of being very clear that I was not going to try to convince you to stop eating meat.

So, in this sermon on food, dedicated and prompted by the Hocutts, and a lot about the troubles with meat mostly, you are not asked being today to not consider eating meat. By that I mean, please do not listen as if there is a decision to make. There will be no alter call. This is not an intervention; the rest of your family is not out in the hall ready to gather around and make you hand over that hot dog. It is simply a sermon that needs to be preached because it is morally important, and we understandably hide it like we do everything that we don't want to talk about that is important and embarrassing.

I could have skipped this topic, and have in the past said "No." I could have passed by the opportunity, but for any preacher not to preach a tough sermon for the sake of exposing their hypocrisy, or of offending the good meat eaters who come for the pleasure of church and pay my salary and all that, just seems dangerously close to behaving like the vast numbers of clergy who were quiet in the face of concentration camps, and slavery, and all other social ills we grow comfortable with because they are so common.

And that is really why we're here talking about it. Eating meat, or at least in the way most of us do it, ranks high on the list of unexamined ills we all participate in as members of our culture. That's the take-away line, regardless of what you eat. "Eating meat, or at least in the way most of us do it, ranks high on the list of unexamined ills we all participate in as members of our culture." That is a fact. We are here talking about it because we cannot build the just and peaceful world so many of us long for without addressing this issue.

I am here in the pulpit, with all the regalia on, because I believe food, and the systems that get it to our plates whether we eat meat or not is a significant moral issue. And, one that will increasingly weigh on our consciences moving forward. (Carolyn Waters couldn't be happier.) I am not here to tell you what to do, that is up to you. I am here to create a pause in one of the predictable ways, as Joanne Stepniak Ed phrases it, "(our)cultural conditioning, prejudices, and habit have trained us."

Because this is a tough topic for those among us (self included) who eat the dead flesh of peaceful animals, and consume in one form or another that warm liquid mamma cows produce for their fast-growing calves Let's begin with an honest moment where all the carnivore's among us who are about to be "slaughtered" can sit up straight.

Ready.

First, eating some meat is probably good for you. There, I said it. Meat and fish and dairy products are full of proteins and fats that our body mostly likes, and some seem to need. Some vitamins and minerals are hard to find outside animal proteins. The truth is, our bodies are built to digest meat and dairy. Not perfectly, not quite as well as we digest fruit and vegetables, but make no bones about it.

Get it, "bones."

Make no bones about it, we are built to be able to eat meat and to a slightly lesser degree consume dairy. And, most of us function better when we do. Again, this is not perfect. But neither is anything else in our world perfect. Truth is, in the right proportions, animal proteins can be some of the best, most efficient energy we consume. In fact, evolutionary biologists note that for those pre human ancestors that preceded us, The expansion of our diets to include meat is thought to be one of the key reasons our brains and humanity leapt forward out of monkey-hood.

Take that, you wafer-thin hippies.

More importantly, as Homer Simpson said so profoundly about donuts, "HMMMMMMM! Steak is tasty." And for many, that is all one needs to know.

Ok, carnivores, your moments over. It's time to light the grill

You might have heard the reports of drug-resistant bacteria contained in large amounts of the meat we eat. It is there apparently largely because of the high doses of antibiotic feed animals are given. You certainly have heard about mad cow disease, are probably aware of the need to be religious about cleanliness and chicken and salmonella. It's all the tip of an ugly fatty artery-clogging iceberg.

The little quiz I pulled from the kid's moment was "What animal is responsible for more deaths in the US than any other?" The answer would be cows, mostly for all the heart disease that eating beef causes.

So, if I am going to disappoint our patrons and dare suggest in a sermon that they paid for that a small amount of meat is are good for us . . .

Meat eating is, in America, a major contributor to cancer, heart disease, and obesity. Let's let that simple phrase wash over us like the fat drippings that make up gravy. Meat eating is, in America, a major contributor to cancer, heart disease, and obesity.

HMMMMM Tasty.

I am hardly done.

The animal and dairy industry is one of the most significant environmental problems we have. It takes roughly ten times as much fossil fuel to make up the calories that come from animals then comes from plants. Moreover, meat, and even more so dairy products, carry much more pesticides than plant-based foods do, and methane, an irreversible by-product of animals, is in the same proportions twenty-one times as bad a cause contributor to global warming than CO2 is. And much of the methane we get from our friendly cows has to do with the fact that we largely feed them the foods we want them to eat, not what they naturally ate. Our societies love affair with modern industrial animal husbandry causes lots of problems with aquifers, land degradation, and because it is profitable, deforestation.

So for the buck seventy at the BK drive through I get a cheap snack, but increase my chance of heart disease, aid Global warming, by default contribute to world hunger, and help destroy the rainforest. This should not be surprising. You're a modern adult, you have heard this before.

The factory farms where most of the meat we all eat comes from, is bad for us, bad for the planet, and I don't think we need to wonder about how the animals on factory farms feel.

If you think this is just about cows, let us not forget that industrial commercial long-line fishing is fast tracking our way to killing off our oceans, each year killing about eighty million tons of sea animals, eighty million tons. How are we going to sustain that? We're not.

It is estimated that because of over-fishing and pollution our oceans are half as full of sea life as they were two centuries ago. Half, and although that is getting better in some places, where fisheries are actively being restored it is in general getting worse. Oddly enough, pigs and chickens consume about six times the amount of seafood that we do.

Sufficiently depressed? Good.

If that is not convincing, choke this down. In the trickle-down economics of calories, meat kills in other ways too. Globally, every five minutes, a child dies related to malnutrition or a disease connected to malnutrition. And our collective choice to dedicate water and farmland to meat production rather than plants is a cause of that. Of course, those statistics are biased on who can afford to eat meat, and that is another whole issue of class and resource distribution, but still.

Moreover, in regard to our health, meatpacking-slaughterhouses is one of the most dangerous jobs in the country, and statistics show that as the number of slaughterhouses increase in a community so do the number of violent crimes. That is only a weak correlation, not causation, but . . .

Wow, I think that Whopper Jr. I ate last week is starting to come back on me.

And if this sermon is about meat in particular, it is in general about stopping and intentionally pausing long enough to lift one of the veils that we use to shield our consciences from one of the ills of our modern life.

Melanie Joy in her Beacon Hill published book called, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*, explores the invisible ways that we come to love some animals and eat others without knowing why. Like sexism, racism, etc. Melanie Joy claims our patterns of meat eating, is most harmful when it is unrecognized and unacknowledged. I think that is important.

I do not believe in original sin, but if we humans have a sin worthy of the title, it is likely not that we curiously bit an apple making us aware of good and evil, it is much more likely that closer to an original sin is the fact that good people, in their discomfort with what they know, often put the apple down and turn away hoping to forget what they do know. That is closer to what one might identify as a primary or original sin.

The best part of doing this talk is doing it to you. Talking to you, is simple, for you know that it is not curiosity but ignorance or apathy that usually is our moral downfall.

See, I don't have to convince you that boxing up young calves in coops so tight that they are prohibited from turning around is wrong, or that painfully debeaking chickens crudely and quickly with soldering irons because they live in such vile dense conditions, they will hurt each other in ways they won't in the wild, is a problem.

First, you have likely heard this before. It is no revelation to you that when we regularly fill our farm animals full of antibiotics, we genetically bloat the bladders of cattle to a size that makes mobility hard. I don't have to convince you that these acts are gross violations of the power we as a species have over animals.

I don't have to explain that violates the stewardship we should have, or that these acts violate the sense of how the world should be. I'm blessed to be talking to you, a group of people who want to feel and act justly. But I am talking to you because, like me, you, good people of conscience, you can choose to ignore until you forget how things are.

I am not here to convince you that the way we add growth hormones to the blood systems of feeling, thinking, bleeding creatures, controlling their bodies and lifestyles so that they now live a third of what their natural lives would be, most in horrible conditions, is wrong. Please, you are morally conscious people. So, I don't have to. You can decide how wrong that is yourself. I am only raising this because, part of what we are called to do here is to help one another do the uncomfortable work of keeping our eyes open to the sinister elements of the comfortable parts of our world.

There are many ways to live in this world. We sit at the top of the food chain primarily because we communicate, empathize, cooperate, and share truth better than any other species. And we can use our complexity to oppress or liberate. We have that freedom of choice.

It is valid to see the world as a place where might makes right. For, clearly, largely that is true. And the wholesale way we treat animals as strictly commodities is one way we can use the power we now have as a species.

If your empathy has not been cultivated, then it is valid that at the close of a war rape the women and enslaving children can be a natural just reward for winning a war. If one does not work to hold up the value that everyone as created equal, then having unpaid servants under your control who build your wealth is a good thing. If you're not looking to expand those we choose to be sensitive towards, then we will not see that animals love their kids, get scared, feel pain, and are not just commodities.

But that is not you. I am not speaking to those people. Am I? I am speaking to you. The you who have democracy, and the inherent worth and dignity of each person, built into what would be our creed, if we were not so bloody sensitive to not have a creed.

See, preaching at you on this issue is easy. All I have to do is hold up the veil between our comfort and the reality of this one aspect of our regular lives, one aspect of what we eat. All I have to do is hold that veil that we keep between the people we think we are and want to be, for you to get uncomfortable. All I need to do is that, and your consciences will do the rest.

So, as I said at the start, I am not asking you to do or not do anything. This isn't your first moral rodeo. You know that you are in charge of your own conscience and behavior to do what you think is right.

If you would rather not think about this, I understand. I don't either. I put cream cheese on a bagel just two hours ago. But, just know that not wanting to think about what was going on is exactly how most non-jaded Americans felt about slavery in 1825, how most good Germans felt in the early 1940s, And, that denial is exactly how I feel when I pull into that Burger King drive through.

I would rather not think about this too, but you know what, people, our species holocaust on animals is full on, built step-by-step from the decline of us from farms over the last five generations.

I have a few simple tests that I use to help me evaluate my position on big moral issues, like this one.

First, would a five-year-old who has not been socialized into the way we adults bracket our morality think that in this case, eating meat is wrong?

Second, if you were building the world as it should be, the world we wished for, would, in this case factory farming be part of it?

And last, is it conceivable to look at our industrialized treatment of animals from the perspective of a future generation and see it eventually being categorized with other taboos like slavery, human sacrifice, cannibalism, and the suppression of women?

I love my simple criteria, and to me, in each case the wholesale way we presently in THIS GENERATION treat animals as products and food seems wrong.

In a UUA analysis of meat eating done about a decade ago, it said the following:

"There are societal structures which hide the abuses that take place in factory farming, animal testing, sport shooting, fur trade, animal fights and rodeos. In order to be true to UU principles, members must open their eyes to the hidden suffering around them and recognize that seemingly personal choices make a difference."

I like that wording.

See, to me what is needed to transcend meat in the amounts and manner in which we eat it, is not a new emotion, all that is really needed is that our existing morals we have for others, and for our pets, be made consistent. All that we need to do is let our circle of compassion widen to its proper proportion when the sun shines on it.

I will to kill mosquitos, I will continue to acknowledge even that a dolphin dying in a long drag line feels and even is worse than a tuna who I share a little bit less empathy for.

But I will not retreat from the basic fact that a revolution in our consciousnesses, our diets, and products is becoming a creepingly overdue transformation for people who wish to live in the general moral category of good.

It's not that complicated.

Truth is, some of you may need to eat meat. Many people do. As I said, the right amount of meat and perhaps even dairy is probably good for you. I am not here to be your dietician. My little quarterly adventure in dead flesh, and the cream that goes in my coffee, is not the end of the world,

But, just like the compliant Germans in the thirties and forties, the quiet Americans ok with slavery, and eventually, separate but equal, and a list of good people doing to little, our world is healed and broken one habitual act, one choice, at a time

**AMEN**