Fasting and Feasting:  
a theological ethic of everyday eating

Introduction

Food. Everyday and ordinary, food is something we take into our mouths, taste, chew, swallow, assimilate through our digestive tracts, and, yes, excrete. Few other activities are so necessary and common to all human creatures – as well as all living things, which in some way must take in nutrients to live. Eating is an intimate act, a reminder of our embodiment and the temporal and material needs of bodies. Food stays with us, not just in its chemical assimilation into lipids, proteins, cells walls, and the blood stream, but in our memories. As we begin, I invite you to consider a meal you had in the past, drawing to mind aroma, image, taste, and texture.

Eating and cultivation practices provide a case study of the work of my individual major, which is called “Practicing Theology: ways of being in the world.” In my major, I explore the relation between belief and practice, from the political perspectives we support to the food we eat. My major explores how humans – you and me — creatures capable of inflicting terrible suffering and creating great beauty alike — make meaning in the world. I use the disciplinary lenses of the sciences — namely biology and the social sciences — and of the humanities — namely theology and philosophy — to think about how we orient ourselves to the world and make choices about what is good, true, and beautiful, or if these categories even exist at all. One of my questions is, how far can science take us into the ethical? What does a theological perspective have to add?

Religious perspectives are sometimes marginalized into an intellectual and abstract sphere rather than taken seriously as ethical reflection that juxtaposes itself alongside the realities of the market, the commodity form, and our everyday decisions. In my first religion course, Professor Wilson described religion as fundamentally about a way of being in the world. Religion can form our sensibilities, our everyday actions, what and how we see, whether we live in competition with others, or live into grace and community. Our explanations for our existence frame the ways we live, move and have our being in the world. Catholic theologian Elisabeth Johnson sees the task of theology as seeking “to understand faith more deeply in order to live more vibrantly” (Johnson, 2). In my major, I focus on Christian belief and practice, particularly what it looks like to act out justice in the world.

Theology, philosophy, and ethics help us think about what St. Olaf’s beloved Jim Farrell called the ‘moral ecology of everyday life,’ the web of social values that tie people and nature together (Farrell, 7). Farrell talked about a gap between expressed and operative values — while we express values for freedom, conversation, and love, we act on values of convenience, fun, cool, and conformity. Eating is part of the moral ecology of everyday life, and the choices we make as individuals and as a society matter.

In this presentation, I develop a theological ethic of everyday eating with ecological, social, and sacramental dimensions oriented toward justice. I argue that food in the Christian tradition mediates experience of the divine, and shapes a perspective of
justice with respect to land use, food consumption, and those people with whom we break bread. Eating connects us to vast global trade networks, food histories, biochemical processes, social and ethnic inequalities, and evolutionary histories. As such, eating is a deeply ethical act, one which done with reverence might have powerful effects on the ways we use the world. In the words of practical theologian Dorothy Bass, “what could be more fundamental to a way of life than food?” (Bass, 51).

An Anthropological Reading of Food

Food does not just appear, and not everything is food. Food is a social construction – and not only the recipe. What is good or bad to eat, when we should eat, with whom we should eat – these are all constructed and learned. Food is also a sensational form. By sensational, I mean stimulating all of the senses. Perhaps because of this, the subject is food is often trivialized in academic circles, and alternatively lavishly obsessed over in popular media. We might view food as merely an immediate reality, but it communicates things. Food functions as a symbol, orienting us to key patterns of relationships. For example, tonight we eat what I’ll call ceremonial bread. This bread functions symbolically as a celebration of my senior work and your gathering here to listen, a gift in exchange for your time and attention. I feel compelled to provide, and you feel compelled to eat. We don’t physically need the bread, and maybe some of us don’t even want to eat the bread because we are full, but we eat it as a sign of hospitality received. In this way, we can read food as a kind of cultural text.

Eating together is a fundamental form of human relation. For the Kabre people in Togo, food creates connections stronger than blood. Those children who grow up eating in your household are your children whether by birth or not. The technical word for eating together is commensality. Who do you eat with? In thecaf, students eat with students. In families, people eat in their homes. Some people do not eat with anyone at all. Practices of commensality mark class boundaries, social groups, and deep ethnic inequalities. As a form of inclusion, commensality is simultaneously a form of exclusion. Barbara Kingsolver notes too that having a ‘food culture’ has been cast as the property of a privileged class. She insists that this is not so – culture is the property of a species, and to care about food and its origins should not be limited only to the privileged (Kingsolver, 16).

Eating is highly ritualized across cultures. We eat three meals a day, have certain foods that encode ‘breakfast’ [meaning, to break the fast], use certain utensils and eat certain foods. We gather around the table for celebration, for reunion, for hospitality. Ritual eating centers on relationships. Food functions deliciously as such a ritual object, because it is deeply resonant with our everyday needs as embodied beings in a way that links us with the intangible. It is interesting to note that the Jewish Passover meal is one of the most persistent forms of religious Jewish culture, resistant to secularization. But preparing and serving food are kinds of ritual celebrations, even if not religious: “each invention is ephemeral, but the succession of meals and days has a durable value” (Certeau & Girard, 76).

When we share food with others, we learn how to behave; we learn that people have different preferences which may or may not be accommodated; we learn that people come to the table from different places with different moods and needs; we learn to balance our needs with others; and we learn that there needs to be enough food, or perhaps we learn tragically that there is never enough. At the table we ingest “wisdom about equity and pleasure, virtues of gratitude, temperance, patience and generosity”
Also hidden in our food practices is the development of “deep and lasting dispositions toward land, plants, animals, and humans” (Bass, 51). Sallie McFague suggests that in our formation and education as humans, “we forget that our own lives as well as the ongoing life of our species depend also on living on top of, in between, and inside other forms of life on our planet” (McFague, 63). Indeed, when we eat, it is rare to imagine the farmer milking the cow, planting the lettuce, or picking the strawberry in the weeks and months before we taste our lunch. As such, eating is a deeply ethical act. In the words of anthropologist Mary Douglas, “we simply do not know the uses of food, and our ignorance is explosively dangerous. It is more convenient for us… to think of it as mere bodily input, than to recognize its great symbolic force” (56).

What can we glean ethically from such an anthropological examination of food? Not only must we eat, but we do so repeatedly and often, which promotes an awareness of our desire to live and our “utter dependence upon the generosity of the earth and its peoples” (Parks, 13). Eating demonstrates that we cannot live alone, and as such is a daily reminder of our own need and mortality. Not only this, but to survive, to eat, means participating in the cycle from life, to death, to life again. How do we recognize or describe this fact—what metaphors could or should we use? A metaphor of mystery, I think, best captures the beauty of this cycle and helps us to honor the interrelationships:

Eating, a “basic and literal reality, a deeply mystical matter. When we eat, we not only take into ourselves another being, but that being becomes part of us, those molecules become part of human tissue. The metaphor for food here is less that of fuel and more that of communion. Eating and being eaten incarnates one of the central mysteries of life: each life at some point becoming food for other life, in an ongoing chain of life, death, and mutual substance” (Berkadal, Earth Letter, p. 10)

This leads us to the ecological insight, that all beings are related and need each other in various ways to continue with life. The word ‘ecology’ is a fairly recent word, its usage shooting up around the time of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring. The word comes from the Greek oikos, meaning ‘home.’ The earth is our home, one we’ve become attuned to in ways we cannot imagine. What metaphors we use to describe this relation, however, are up to us. The science of ecology prescribes neither mechanistic relations nor deep spiritual relations. But the metaphor of mystery honors sanctity in life. Food does not come from us; it comes from the earth, and for the Christian, ultimately from God.

Disordered Eating, from industrial farm to fork

As a society, we suffer from disordered eating. Contemporary American food practices teach us to regard food in a thoughtless manner. The processes of food production and distribution has become specialized, something to be charted, planned, and projected, but not something to in which to take delight or give thanks. American food culture is not monolithic, and the ‘conventional’ practices, often contrasted with organic or local, are not all bad or ill-intended. Neither are organic or local movements free from issues and critiques. However, I seek to criticize those practices of cultivation, distribution, and eating that obscure and ignore ethical aspects of food production and issues related to social life.

To talk about these issues, I first want to talk about the concept of the ‘commodity fetish.’ A commodity is an object or service with a price set by the market. The commodity fetish, whether a tomato or a box of cereal, comes to us almost like magic: the production and any exploitation of land or people behind the commodity are
obscured and hidden. The interdependence of food production and distribution systems is hidden when we encounter a commodified strawberry or beet, and we no longer see the deep dependence of our lives on the soil and the health of the land, as well as the people whose hands do the work.

In his book *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, Seth Holmes documents the actual and symbolic violence experienced by Triqui people who migrate to work in US strawberry fields. He asks a question that challenged me when I read it: “It is likely that the last hands to hold the blueberries, strawberries, peaches, asparagus, or lettuce before you pick them up in your local grocery store belong to Latin American migrant laborers. How might we respect this intimate passing of food between hands?” (Holmes, 43).

The systems that bring our food to us are often unjust, treating humans without dignity and reinforcing racism and other issues. Our complicity in harmful and unjust structures can be thought of as a structural sin, a public, communal sin, one shared by all of us.

Our eating itself also suffers from commodification, as eating is reduced to fueling. Food is reduced to commodity, and production is reduced to mechanisms, industry. We also encounter religion as a commodity, as something to consume. Consider the phrase ‘church shopping.’ This consumptive mentality prevents religious values from penetrating our practices: “religion becomes abstract, virtual sentiments that exist solely to give flavor to the already established forms of everyday life” (Miller, 105).

**A Theological Ethic of Everyday Eating**

So if religious values and practices are to actually influence our everyday lives, we will need to do some work in getting us there given our tendency to consume religion as ornamentation for expressed values, rather than as directives for operative values. But religion in general—and I argue here Christianity in particular—can emphatically shape dispositions of care and respect for the land and for life. A quote from a study guide for congregations puts this well: “Food is many things, but at its heart it is a spiritual matter. For the Christian, God comes, we attest, in the things of this world. God comes to us not as otherworldly interruption into the stuff of our lives, but as grace and power within the stuff, the ‘matter’ or our lives” (Berkedal, 32).

Scripture, theology, and practice serve as sources for reflection on how we might honor the life and death cycles in which we participate when we eat. In Christian scriptures, agrarian metaphors and ideas pervade the Hebrew Bible and Jesus’ parables. In Christian practice, food mediates experience of the divine through rituals of the Eucharist, feasting, and fasting. The arc of the Christian Bible from garden to eschatological feast is particularly poignant when bringing theology to bear on food. Why are these metaphors of agriculture and eating together the metaphors used to describe God’s vision of creation? Eating can be an act of justice, an act of healing, and an act of joy.

**The Ecological: theology of creation and the land as moral agent**

Christianity is generally thought of as an orthodox religion rather than as orthopraxy. This means it is centered on right belief rather than right practice. But the Judaism out of which Christianity grew involved important practices of faith that enacted the covenant relationship between God and God’s people. These practices included dietary restrictions and agricultural practices to care for the land.
The Judeo-Christian creation story offers a narrative through which to see and interpret the world. In the Christian tradition, food is a means of delighting in God, of communion with God, but also symbolic of human failure in the orienting text of the Old Testament. Naming the world around us as creation implies different relationships and paradigms as naming it as nature. The word creation implies the living world in light of its relation to its Creator. Such language implies a theocentric—God-centered—rather than anthropocentric—human-centered—view of the world, in which everything is dependent on God for its being and sustaining breath. “Creatures cannot and were never meant to exist in isolation or separation from each other. Kinship and harmony, mutuality and intimacy are to be the rule of healthy life together” (Wirzba, 39).

It is interesting that the creation story begins in a garden. Gardens demonstrate in “an especially clear way the complex array of relationships that join us to soil and water and to creatures and God, relationships that have nurture and feeding at their root” (36). In a garden, timing is not set by the gardener, but the garden. The biblical story offers an alternative to modern individualism: humanity is what it is because of its relation to soil—a damah—adam, humus—human (Davis). In the Christian observance of Ash Wednesday, congregants confess that they are dust, and to dust they shall return.

Later in Genesis, God makes a covenant with the Israelites that involves land. In the Hebrew Bible, “the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth, or more particularly of the land of Israel, is the best index of the health of the covenant relationship” (Davis, 8). When Israel is disobedient, thorns and briars abound, rain is withheld, and the land languishes (Davis, 8). There is a vital connection between the health of soil and health of human communities. In the scriptures, land functions as a living being—it can vomit people out—and a moral agent. Sabbath years also transform private land into a public domain. Farmers are to allow fields to lie fallow in the seventh year to give the land a rest as well as to allow those who are hungry to glean from the fields (Exod. 23:10-11).

**The Social: Jesus’ inclusive eating practices and the righteous fast**

The eating practices of Jesus provide a paradigm for the social aspects of our eating. Jesus comes ‘eating and drinking,’ the gospels tell us. He is criticized as a glutton and a drunkard. Jesus was deeply concerned with real food and real hunger. Eating among tax collectors and sinners, the man violated the norms of commensality that structured society in terms of class and purity ideals. These “stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes and inviting the excluded to his table are embarrassments, perhaps scandals, in their mundanity and inclusivity.” (McFague, 189)

It is also clear in Jesus’ ministry that God intends that all be fed. Feeding stories by the thousands abound in the gospels—and from just a few loaves comes an abundance, enough for all. Jesus’ first miracle is turning water into wine for the wedding at Cana. In one theological interpretation, following Jesus is all about practice: continuing “Christ’s ministries of feeding, healing, forgiving, and reconciling” (McFague, 67). Food ensigns his humanity, but also his divinity in the resurrection story in which Jesus eats the fish with his disciples after his death on the cross. Jesus is known to his disciples at Emmaus in the breaking of the bread.

In our world, where hunger is rampant, how might the eating practices of this first century man influence our own eating practices? How might it influence the ways we deal with hunger? Who will we eat with, who will we share food with? Who will
share food with us in times of need? Jesus concern with food is not one of purity, but of relationships.

Let’s move to a present day context to consider this for a moment, with the modern soup kitchen in your mind. Too often food assistance and charity programs create a hierarchy of those who serve and those who are being served, furthering power dynamics and privileges that are already there and preventing real relationships from forming. For instance, one person I interviewed described a time when she took her youth group kids to a soup kitchen after they had done a thirty hour fast. They expected to be serving food, but she had them all eat the food rather than serve it. They were mortified, because they did not want to be associated with those people.

Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast. We move now to talk about fasting as a material practice oriented toward justice. Fasting and feasting can be thought of as ways of orienting people to their eating, to what they take into their bodies. Christian tradition has no doctrine or explicit food rules, but feasting and fasting throughout Christian History, particularly for women, has been an important mode of communion with God. Believers fast in contrast to Adam’s eating. In the practice of fasting, the Christian is wary of the danger that any practice becomes a work, upon which the worker relies.

While religious fasts are rare in our day and age, we practice aspects of this by denying ourselves certain foods. The modern anorexic and the slew of fad diets use fasting as a means of control over the body. Christian fasting historically took place on specific days of the week and certain seasons of the church year. Wednesday and Friday were traditionally fast days that called to mind Jesus’ suffering and death. Sunday is the Christian feast day, the Resurrection day. The season before Easter is Lent, which is a time of penance and fasting in preparation for baptism, also confession, education, prayer, and contemplation of the human condition of sin, the mortality of life: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Fasting is often viewed as an ascetic practice, but the suffering felt in the body through hunger is part of the point of fasting, to participate in the suffering of Christ on the cross.

But fasting is not just meant to be an individual discipline, or even a communal one undertaken to strengthen the faith; YHWH insists that fasting also perform a function of justice. In Isaiah 58, God speaks of a fasting that sets the oppressed free, shares bread with the hungry, and brings the homeless into one’s own house. A similar justice function is expected for Israel’s festivals. The justice component is highlighted in Caroline Walker Bynum’s assessment of fasting in medieval piety, that the purpose was to join the community into one, give alms so that others could eat, and tying the Christian to the rhythms of nature in a spiritual way, as times of scarcity became correlated with times of fasting. Fasting does not make sense without prayer and almsgiving, three things that highlight right relationship – almsgiving – to others, prayer, to God, and fasting, to self. The self-sacrifice of fasting is meant to bring to mind the origin of food from God and be done in orientation towards others.

*The Sacramental: Eucharistic Ethics*

An ethic of eating developed out of the Christian tradition has ecological implications, social implications, and also a sacramental quality. A sacrament simply means a sign: a sign of God’s grace, and a manifestation of God’s promise of life. Sacramental theology is all about mediation of the divine through sensational forms, like food.
Religion often gets categorized into a spiritual sphere over and above a material sphere; a privileging of the mind over the body that is the legacy of early enlightenment thinking. Such an opposition ignores the way religion is experienced in the body through through material and sensational forms. Sensational forms trigger as well as condense religious experience. Within the radical materialism of the body, we always have the capacity for transcendence, a unique exteriority, that locates us elsewhere and otherwise even as it is grounded in and tethered to the living body here. A beyond that exceeds the ordinary. Scriptures instruct believers to ‘taste and see that the Lord is good.’ Such a metaphor implies an intimacy, rawness, and materiality of such knowledge. Taste and wisdom in Hebrew both have the same root.

For medieval women in the Christian tradition, food was an important part of their piety. Rather than an ascetic act denying the flesh and seeking to escape the body, fasting practices drew on the possibilities provided by fleshiness” (Bynum, 6). The physical suffering caused by hunger was the point of the fasting, because it gave entrance to participation and suffering with Christ’s body on the cross. Food was a symbol especially accessible to women, who were intimately involved in preparation and distribution of food.

The experience of the fast also heightened medieval women’s experience of the feast on the body and blood of Christ. Food was a fundamental economic and religious concern: “to eat was a powerful verb. It meant to consume, to assimilate, to become God” (Bynum, 3). The mystic Hadewijch wrote: “love’s most intimate union is through eating, tasting, and seeing interiorly.” This quote from Bynum’s work is particularly salient:

“Yet food was crucial to the religious experience of medieval women, in ways so rich and complicated…food was a powerful symbol. Like body, food must be broken and spilled forth in order to give life. Macerated by teeth before it can be assimilated to sustain life, food mirrors and recapitulates both suffering and fertility. Thus food, by what it is, seems to symbolize sacrifice and service. And in Christian doctrine, the suffering, broken, crucified body on the cross, from which springs humankind’s salvation, is food.” (Bynum, 30)

In the lives of these devout women, food mediates experience of the divine.

This experience is also an affirmation of the material. Christianity is often cast as a spiritual over a material religion, but really at its theological core is a hypermaterial religion, a religion that appreciates the real world and even allows us to experience the divine through the senses. This is one of the implications for Christians of God becoming incarnate – literally enfleshed – as a human being, eating, drinking, with internal organs, cells, atoms and all. Wendell Berry brings this materiality to bear on the ways we see the world:

“It is not the lover of material things but the abstractionist who defends long-term damage for short term gain, or who calculates the “acceptability” of industrial damage to ecological or human health, or who counts dead bodies on a battlefield. The true lover of material things does not think in this way, but is answerable instead to the paradox of the parable of the lost sheep: that each is more precious than all” (Berry quoted on 82 in Davis).

Christianity therefore may cultivate a mindfulness of the body as a site for divine encounter. Eating mediates an experience of interdependence and of the divine at work in all of us.

The central feast in the Christian church is the bread and wine of the Eucharist, also called communion. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek *eucharisteo*, which means thanksgiving. The Eucharist is a sacrament, sign, of God’s presence in the world,
Based on Jesus' words at the Passover Seder with his disciples, on the night on which he was betrayed. It is a sign of a promise, a promise of salvation and life in the midst of death. In this meal of bread and wine, the finite becomes capable of the infinite. In ingesting the bread and wine, God becomes a part of the eater, and the eater becomes a part of God. "To eat this meal in the community is to continue what began in the life of Jesus, who came eating and drinking, held meals with sinners, spoke of the dominion of God as a wedding feast, and interpreted his own death as a meal" (Lathrop, 43-4).

The ritual of the Eucharist demonstrates power structures at work in food, but also offers a model for egalitarian fellowship. Historically, the sacrament of the Eucharist enacts an extreme exercise of male power and privilege: "the host was wholly controlled by a celibate male priesthood, the laity were usually denied the wine, only the smallest amounts were allowed, and ‘leftovers’ of any kind were hastily consumed" (Fickenscher, 364). But it was not always so. There was a gradual evolution from less controlled beginnings. The earliest Christian communities were meal-sharing fellowships (Bass, 54).

In sharing the rite of the Eucharist, "We enact a way of eating together that disrupts the way we usually gather around food: we all eat at the same table; we eat only small amounts; everyone is invited; the body we eat is not one we kill, but rather one who gives himself and yet never dies" (Fickensher, 365). God’s presence in this sacrament of ordinary food of bread and wine opens us up the possibility to consider other conditions of reality as sacramental. The practice of Eucharist resists reduction of food and bodies to mere market consumption. An ethic of eating developed with respect to this ritual is egalitarian, with an ethic of enough for all. This eating references the manna story, and the logic of sufficiency and enough for everyone that marked God’s provision to the Israelites in the wilderness.

A Eucharistic ethic unfolds from this physical act of eating that moves beyond intellectual assent to sharing fellowship with those who are different. It is an enactment of jubilee, a “resistance to culture of scarcity for the masses and excess for the few” (Fickenscher, 365). It is a sign of God’s reign for all people. Food is never eaten individually – connect our bodies to other bodies, spiritual nourishment and presence in Christ that links us to all bodies who have shared in this meal throughout time and place.

If all eating is sacramental because of this sacrament, then there is reason for us to give pause to think about what we eat, how we eat, and how we might encounter the divine through eating. Such a vision also opens us up to see those who do the work “of preparing the food for others to eat [as] a priest, weaving the fabric of life as the sacred ordinary work of the everyday” (Parks, 14). It is to this blurring between the ordinary and extraordinary that I am drawn.

For Sara Miles, left-wing lesbian, atheist journalist and midlife convert to Christianity, the Eucharist is her entrance to church and becomes the inspiration for a food shelf she starts. She walks into St. Gregory’s in San Francisco, eats the bread and the wine, and realizes that she is hungry. So she keeps going back. Her associations with sharing food, feeding people, and being fed throughout her lifetime provide a framework in which eating this meal at the church is a powerful, mystical, and transformative event despite her anti-religious upbringings. God in this central meal “offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same” (Miles, xv-xvi). She seeks to do just that in the
food shelf set up around the expensive altar at St. Gregory’s, where people come in a few at a time to choose breads, vegetables, and other foods.

In the sacrament, believers are also connected ecologically to the earth that produced the elements. Wine connotes festive joy, the mystery of yeast and fermentation, storytelling, and community. Bread calls to mind the fruitfulness of the earth and the cultivation of wheat. In these ways, we find the ecological and the social coming full circle in the act of the Eucharist, which opens us up to view all eating as mediating interdependence with creation and dependence on the divine.

**Conclusion**

Food pushes up against us as part of everyday, ordinary life. It involves us in life and death cycles of interdependence. In the Christian faith, humans are stewards of an earth ultimately owned by God. In eating, we have the opportunity to honor those interrelationships. Theology can help orient us to an ecological, social, and sacramental ethic of eating. We need tools and religious traditions to help orient us to ethical practices in a moral gray zone of modern industrial food production and consumption in which we encounter food as a commodity abstracted from its origins. The dual meaning of the word practice may help us here; it is both a continual way of doing things and a trying-and-failing-and-trying-again kind of practice.

In the course of my senior project, I have sought to cultivate a religious imagination, one that animates us to imagine a world where we are in right relationship and recognize and honor the interdependence of life, as well as ultimately dependent on someone other than ourselves, the divine.

We will not be perfect, but we can strive for better ways of living together that help us all approach a more peaceful, flourishing, and exuberantly alive world as creatures of God, hopeful of resurrection. Whatever your beliefs, there is searching to do for all of us as we seek to align our expressed values with our operative values, and honor the sacredness of life in intentional and thoughtful ways.

I will now take any questions.