

St. Paul's Halifax.
A reflection on Acts 16:9-15, Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5, and John 14:23-29
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“FOOD AND THE NEW JERUSALEM”

Last week I spoke about the difficult “agape” love that Christ calls us to in order to realize the new heaven and the new earth. The call to self-sacrificial love that we are to extend to all humanity, the costly love that transcends death, suffering, and pain. A love that has the power to transform the old earth, the one we live in now.

Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” What is this peace that Jesus leaves with us? What is this peace that he gives to us but not as the world gives? When most of us think of peace we think of as the absence of armed conflict. The Hebrew word for peace is “shalom” and carries meaning far richer than merely the absence of conflict. It carries the meaning of completeness, of soundness, of welfare and of peace. It carries the meaning of friendship and right relationship between humans and between humans and God, it refers in particular to covenant relationship between humans and God, the covenant where we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and where in return God will remember our sins no more. It will be this shalom that governs the Holy city Jerusalem whose name in Hebrew means heritage (*yerusha*) of peace (*shalom*).

It is the vision of this New Jerusalem that John shares with us. The city of peace, the city of God that will encompass all nations of the world. “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” “People will bring to it the glory and the honour of the nations.” In this vision there is no temple because God and the lamb will dwell with us. In this new reality the gates of the city will never be shut because there will be no one to keep out or guard against, nothing unclean will enter it and nothing accursed will be found there, there will be no darkness because the Lord God will be the light perpetual. Here the river of the water of life will flow through the middle of the city and the tree of life will produce fruits to feed everyone abundantly and leaves to heal all the nations of the earth. This is John’s vision of the holy city, descended from heaven to earth and governed by the peace, the shalom that Christ left with us and gave to us.

Why then are our teenagers participating in a 30-hour famine? Well the short answer is because they are trying to raise awareness that 27,000 children a day are dying of hunger and easily preventable causes. Access to clean drinking water and enough nutritious food are denied millions of people each day while a small minority of humanity consume water and food far in excess of their daily needs. John’s vision is of a future where all humanity lives in the harmony of shalom, human to human, human to God, and human to nature. Where the tree of life provides an abundance for all, no less than Eden recreated. So why do we live in a world where people starve even though there is food enough for all? And

why are we moving inexorably toward ecological disaster even though we know how to avoid it?

I believe that part of the answer lies in how we think about food. I believe that we as a society have become geographically, intellectually, and spiritually disconnected from our food. This disconnection results in complacency about food, ignorance of how food is harvested or produced or prepared, and a disinterest in what the larger ecological and human costs of food production, food harvesting, and food distribution are. It has also resulted in an abdication of our responsibilities with regard to food and by default given control of food production and distribution to those who now use food as commodity. In all this any sense of spirituality or of humility with regard to God's gift of food is difficult to see, is lost, or is beyond the norms of discourse within our society. Such a loss of respect for and knowledge about food is in no small part at the root of our current ecological crisis.

I contend that the abdication of our responsibility toward food has allowed for its commodification. This has led to industrial scale food production and harvesting techniques whose primary objective, I claim, is not the production or harvesting of good food for people, but to make profit. Such commodification changes the "bottom line" for these initiatives from the production of good healthy food to the production of money. Within such a monetarily driven framework, every process used in the production or harvesting of food is subjected only to the litmus test of economic efficiency and its value as God-given food, its worth in and of itself, and the value of the God's earth from which it is extracted is discounted entirely.

The food industrialists of the world spend a large proportion of their influence maintaining this condition of disconnection. They actively re-engineer public opinion through advertising to accept destructive food production and harvesting methods, and exclusionary food distribution practices, as normative, as the way things are and should be. They refine public opinion with surgical precision to ensure that poisoned foods will be acceptable if only they have the proper "mouth feel" and "nose", if only they appeal to the proper "demographic", if only they can be produced at minimum cost, if only they can be distributed widely and efficiently so as to achieve maximum profits over the shortest possible period of time. The fact that this food is available only to those able to pay the highest prices, the health impacts arising from their consumption, or environmental impacts arising from their production or harvesting, are relegated to externalities, will be dealt with by corporate lawyers, and will only be considered if they threaten to reduce profits, and then only with an eye toward "working around" the problem. Ethical questions arising from these issues, such as the use of raw materials, that could feed many around the globe, to produce highly refined "specialty foods" for high-paying consumers, are ignored with impunity or are obviated by insidious public relations gambits.

I believe that Christ calls us to examine our own positions in the world, to ask how we want to be in the world and who we want to be in the world. He calls us to question the hegemony of economic arguments and to participate in the decisions of what will, and will not be tolerated in food distribution, food harvesting, and food production practices. He calls to actively participate in

establishing those practices by what is good both for the majority of humans and for the earth both in the short, and long term. Where decision on who decides who eats, and who does not, are informed by the currently muted, or silenced, voices of the marginalized. In short, where the future vision of food on local, regional, and global scales, can be discussed in a framework that values and strives for humaneness, justice, equity, healthy food, and a healthy earth, and not just as a means of profit for the food barons. We are called to remember that we are but strangers and sojourners on this world, that we are not its masters but merely its children. This is the tier where ethical frameworks have real currency. This is the tier within which we decide whether or not economic arguments will continue to trump ecological arguments.

I believe that part of the solution to this condition requires a “re-imagining” of the place and purpose of humans in the world, of our place in the “community of the earth”¹. I believe that it requires us to actively oppose the consumer oriented, manufactured, vision of who or how we ought to be in the world, the vision that promulgates limitless and “free” choice without consequence, without considering the impacts on our fellow humans, or on our island home. This engineered vision maintains the status quo and will further commodify our world. It is the vision that leads inexorably to Earth Incorporated, where the economic tier of discourse holds absolute sway, where the economic imagineers shape and form our desires, and where any sense of humility toward God’s gift of food and sense of sanctity of our island home, or any sense of satisfaction in sharing this good food in community with our fellow humans, will become forever anathema, where the new Jerusalem cannot even be imagined let alone realized.

Both Peter and Paul had visions that they were to preach the Gospel of Christ to the gentiles, to the world. Neither scaled the ramparts of Rome but started with a single family and a small gathering of women by a river. We as individuals have great power in the small choices we make each day. Making ourselves aware of where our food comes from and deciding whether or not it is good food that leads to shalom, or merely a commodity that leads only to profit, is one such choice. Our small step toward John’s vision of the new Jerusalem. Thanks be to God.