



OUR FOOD WILL REDEEM OUR LIVES

BY CRAIG GOODWIN


WE IDENTIFIED FOUR RULES TO LIVE BY: LOCAL, USED, HOMEGROWN, AND HOMEMADE. IT SEEMED A RIDICULOUS PROPOSAL.

My wife and I are pastors at Millwood Presbyterian Church in Spokane, Washington. We live in the older section of a “master-planned community” lined with shiny plastic fences and three-car garages. The Walk Score website assesses the walkability and sustainable footprint of our neighborhood at only six points out of a possible one hundred, and labels us “car dependent.” We are like the other fifty percent of U.S. residents who live in the suburbs.

Up until 2008, our food lives were fairly conventional. While we enjoyed gardening and eating healthily, we were not overly

concerned that our daughters, Noel, eight, and Lily, six, were connoisseurs of McDonald’s Happy Meals and high-fructose corn syrup. Our primary logic in food purchases were cost and convenience, and our pantry was full of Costco-sized portions of tortilla chips and Cheerios. But on December 27 of 2007, our consumer choices took a radical and unexpected turn.

That night, an impromptu gripe session with my wife about the mad rush of Christmas consumerism turned into a soul-searching conversation about the state of our lives. We were especially concerned with



how disconnected our faith felt from our purchases. We wondered aloud about rules for consumption that might steer us in a better direction. We talked about how great it was to know the farmers at our local farmers' market and how much we enjoyed growing our own food during the summer. We questioned the compulsion to always have the new and next thing, and acknowledged that buying used items and even making some of our own goods was a redemptive direction worth exploring.

We identified four rules: local, used, homegrown, and homemade. At some point I asked, "What if we tried to live by those rules for a year? What if everything we consumed and purchased this year was either local, used, homegrown, or homemade?"

It was a ridiculous proposal. We had three days to prepare. It was the middle of winter and Spokane was frozen like an ice cube. There were hundreds of unresolved questions: What would we eat? What would Noel and Lily think? How would we fuel our cars? Where would we get toilet paper? But in a moment of both grace and naiveté, we were gripped by the allure of a grand adventure and decided that night to give it a try. It would become our year of plenty, and our lessons and choices around food would be center stage, gradually evolving into a book by the same name.

Though we researched like secret agents in an episode of "Mission Impossible," **we quickly discovered how difficult it is to trace the source of items on grocery-store shelves.** On a tour of our local dairy and

flourmill, we discovered that most of the different brands of commodity foods on store shelves come from the same big pot. Nancy called the local cheddar cheese manufacturer—one of the largest in the country—only to learn that they ship most of their forty-pound blocks of cheese to Wisconsin. (Yes, we were willing to buy forty pounds of cheese if that meant we could eat quesadillas.) We discovered with delight that sugar is made from sugar beets as well as from sugar cane; then observed a day of grief and mourning when we learned that the sugar beet factory in our region had closed. We lived without chocolate and peanut butter and grew to appreciate lentils, winter squash, and dandelion leaf salads. I learned to make butter and ice cream, with my daughters as consultants and taste testers. I even took a Master Food Preserver course so that we could make our own salsa, pickles, and jam.

We dug out a thousand square feet of lawn to make room for a vegetable garden labyrinth and sneaked a brood of five laying hens into our backyard, careful to stay under the radar of our county's ban on residential chickens. **It was an eye-opening, frustrating, enchanted season of reconnecting with land, food, and the people who bring food to market.**

Looking back on our experience, two key discoveries stick with me. First, there exists a widespread community of foodie



revolutionaries pursuing more redemptive practices around what we eat. Just a few weeks before we devised our rules, the Oxford English Dictionary dubbed “locavore” their word of the year, acknowledging the rising popularity of the local food movement with its farmers’ markets and CSA-vegetable-subscription programs. We joined the local Slow Food chapter and came to adore new heroes like Alice Waters, the sustainable food evangelist and edible schoolyard activist, and Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. To our delight and surprise we learned that we weren’t the only year-long edible experimenters. Barbara Kingsolver’s, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, topped the best-seller lists in 2008 and Colin Beavan, aka No Impact Man, was fresh off his stint as a test pilot on the eco-frontier. I started

a blog to share what we were learning and found a ready audience eager to know where their milk and beef comes from. I even started getting calls from the New York Times and National Public Radio.

The other key discovery was that our new food practices had a sacred element that turned our eyes to God in unexpected ways. They led us to lift up prayers of thanksgiving not only for the meal on our plate but also for the farmers who provided it. We felt a new connection to the



Creator of the land and a reinvigorated sense of God’s provision. Jesus’ call to consider the lilies took on a fresh immediacy in our daily lives. We discovered what most of God’s people have known throughout history—that practices around growing and eating food are fertile ground for spiritual formation.

These two discoveries—a vibrant food movement in the wider culture and the power of food choices in spiritual formation— point to a wonderful opportunity for churches to contribute to the wider work of God’s unfolding kingdom. Yet this opportunity comes at a time when the church in North America has never been less engaged with these issues.

There are certainly exceptions. Seventh Day Adventists are still known for their commitment to vegetarianism and American Mennonites continue to publish the best church cookbook ever assembled (*More With Less Cookbook*). But the few heirloom food traditions that remain—Fish Fridays, Jell-O-salad laden potlucks, and an occasional fast day — have little meaning in the spiritual formation of America’s churches. Compared to the prominence of food as a means of formation in Scripture, this lack of engagement is telling.

The first words spoken by God to Adam and Eve are, “You are free to eat...” followed quickly by the prohibition, “You may not eat...” Eating and sharing miraculous manna in the wilderness is the central spiritual practice of God’s exodus people. Jeremiah tells the new exiles that an important part of their recovery

process is to plant gardens (Jer. 29). Food choices while in exile became the distinctive expression of faithfulness and allegiance to Yahweh.

Jesus' teachings are full of references to feasts and banquets, seeds and soils.

Jesus' ministry begins with a forty-day fast and the temptation to turn stones into bread. The Gospels are dominated by stories about when Jesus ate and whom he ate with, culminating in a meal of bread and wine.

The history of the early church turns on food ethics. The gospel is opened to the Gentiles based on Peter's hunger-induced vision of a blanket full of food animals that he is instructed to kill and eat (Acts 10). The character of the Gentile church is reshaped by the issue of eating food sacrificed at pagan temples (1 Cor. 8). James takes up the cause of farmers when he reprimands the rich oppressors who are not paying a fair wage for the harvest: "The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty" (James 5:4). **Food is central to the Biblical story, yet it plays a minor role in the life of most churches today.**

Modern-day foodies, vegans, locavores, animal rights activists, organic evangelists, industrial agriculture doomsayers, slow food aficionados, #agchat twitterers, raw milk radicals, community gardeners, and suburban chicken ranchers are all, in their own ways, reclaiming the sacredness of food. Their passion and conviction offers the church a helpful reminder that **the choices we make around food are central to the**

journey of ethical and spiritual formation. Our family experiment introduced me to this wonderful community of food activists, and I'd like nothing more than to get them in conversation with the church. Its like having two great friends you know would really enjoy each other's company if they could just get some time to hang out. They both have much to learn from one another.

Although our definition of "local" has expanded, and we no longer make our own butter, our family continues to explore and discover the formative power of food. We've learned that our suburban setting is not an obstacle to pursuing an alternative path. Our church runs a weekly farmers' market in the parking lot and recently established a community garden nearby on the site of an abandoned pumpkin patch. The local newspaper recently dubbed us the "food church," which I take as a great compliment.

Food, after all, shaped the spirit of the early church, and it holds out great hope for nourishing the journey of the church into the future. c

