"The Spirituality of Food and Feasting"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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What did you eat for dinner last night? With whom did you eat? Perhaps you sat down to a home-cooked meal around the table with family. Or, maybe you ordered a pizza and sat on the couch to watch some tv. Maybe you prepared some simple fare and sat down to a quiet meal alone.

Barring the unusual, I suspect that we all ate *something* last night. In my household, we vary how, what, and when we eat. Our different schedules inevitably mixing things up day to day. However, the one constant is the late afternoon appearance of my teenage son who asks, "Mom, when and what is dinner?" Anyone else know that routine?

For me, the daily routine of figuring out dinner is generally more work than pleasure. I'm grateful for my partner, Bill, who shares this task with me—and for my son whose helpfulness is real, if somewhat coerced. Yet, food is essential day after day, meal after meal. If we are fortunate to have reliable access to food, then we must answer the question: what's for dinner?

But not all meals are alike. Some meals at some moments are special. Some meals become *feasts*—celebratory meals to mark a special occasion. As our reading by Alexander Schmemann reminds us, feasting is a part of our ancestral DNA. In agricultural cultures that demanded a lot of hard physical labor to provide food for sustenance, Schmemann writes that feasts were not simply "breaks" in the routine of work and rest. They were also joyful celebrations of the fruit of all that labor. Indeed, they were celebrating with the very essential and wonderful *food* they had produced.

Some of you may know that I spent the summer of 2012 working as a fieldhand at Hutchins Farm, an organic fruit and vegetable farm in Concord. I did this for a number of reasons. Firstly, I love being outside in the summer and this job was a reward to myself from spending the previous five months chained to my desk as I finished my doctoral dissertation. Secondly, one of my passions is understanding our food system—where our food comes from and who produces it.

Spending the summer on a farm taught me a several things. I learned why my Grandma May, the farmwife, always made me scrub behind my ears. It turns out that working in the dirt all day makes you really, really, *really* dirty. I also learned how valuable good soil is for

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the whole process of growing—one reason I'm a big fan of sustainable and organic farming practices. But what I didn't expect to learn was how incredibly wealthy one can feel when awash in access to great food. Although my actual wage was pitifully low, I was allowed to harvest whatever I liked to take home, giving me a sense of abundance and wealth.

Now I know it's possible to buy good fruit and vegetables. But, it's entirely different when you can pick through the strawberry patch to find a quart of berries all the exact level of ripeness that *you* like. Or eating a small, bright orange carrot right from the ground—a few crumbs of harmless soil still attached. Or, my favorite, eating melons so perfectly ripe that they burst open in the field, unsalable but more delicious than any I had ever bought.

Food and eating can be a tremendous delight. We are at our base sensual animals and food can be a gift to the senses. The colors and textures, the tastes and scents of food can bring great joy. While celebrating the joys of food, I want to also acknowledge that for some eating is a heartbreaking struggle—whether the struggle comes from lack of access to adequate food or from battling dynamics of disordered eating patterns such as anorexia or bulimia. I also suspect there are also those among us who will shortly be making New Year's resolutions to lose some weight and for whom food can be a struggle of another kind. Food can indeed be a struggle for too many.

But what I hear in Schmemman is that food can also be a ritual tool—a medium that moves the meal beyond the function of physical sustenance and into the realm of meaning-making and religion. Food becomes a way not only to sustain ones life, but also to celebrate the gift of that life. While Schmemman's text rightly points to the roots of Christian feasts in the agricultural and pagan feasts of the Roman Empire, I also suspect that the role of feasts in Christianity are as likely rooted in Judaism. Indeed, the central ritual meal in Christianity—the meal shared by Jesus and his disciples and still celebrated as the Lord's Supper, Eucharist, or Catholic Mass—was in fact a Jewish Passover feast.

Writing about the relationship of food and Judaism, Gil Marks, rabbi and author of the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food,* says:

> "There is no way you can practice Judaism religiously or culturally without food. Food has been intrinsic to Jewish ritual, life and culture from the outset. What is the very first act that the Israelites in Egypt are commanded to do? It's to have a communal meal—roast lamb and herbs, some nice *shwarma*. And with that, the beginning of the Jewish people is through a meal. The famous joke—"They tried to kill us, we won, now let's eat"—is not really that far from the truth. Within the Jewish legal framework is an understanding that various rituals are accompanied by a *seudat mitzvah*, or celebratory meal, whether a *bris* or a baby naming or a bar

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> mitzvah or a wedding. Any sort of life cycle event is accompanied by a *seudat mitzvah*."

And so, celebratory meals are rooted *deep* within the history, culture, and religious life of Judaism. Religious rituals are paired with meals. They go hand in hand.

In addition to formal religious rituals, for many being a Jew has also meant following the system of dietary laws, the kashrut, and seeking to eat kosher. Claudia Roden, author of *The Book of Jewish Food,* links keeping kosher with cultural identity. She writes,

> "For the Jews of the diaspora, food has always been important, because observance of the dietary laws created a spiritual atmosphere around it. And when they stopped keeping kosher, the "Jewish foods" from their old homelands became even more important, because they were part of their identity. For Jews who weren't very religious, who had lost their old languages—like Yiddish, Ladino or Judeo-Arabic—food became one of the things that they held onto to remind themselves of who they were, of their past and their ancestry."

Grounded in religious observance, food took on a "spiritual" element that gave food a deeper significance than physical sustenance. Food helped Jews to create life meaning by keeping them connected to a larger story, to an ancient and global community, to being a Jew.

I do not think that you need to be Jewish to understand the links between food and identity or food and ancestry. For many of us, particular foods or meals have also become significant links to a larger story, to our ancestors, and to our sense of who we are.

As a congregation, you've already participated in one of my own food rituals when you provided all the wonderful pies for the Installation Service in October. I do simply love eating pies, but to me the pies are more than flour, sugar, and filling. . Growing up, whenever we spent a holiday with my dad's parents, Zane and Virginia, on their farm in mid-Michigan, we *always* had homemade pie. After a failed attempt to learn how make pies in my early 20's, about ten years ago I finally learned how after many attempts and calls to my grandmother in Michigan. Now when I make pie, I do so mindful that I am continuing this tradition from my grandmother, from her grandmother, from a line of grandmothers that in fact extends back generations to some of the women who were part of this congregation at its inception in 1640.

So, for me, a pie is not just a pie—it's a connection to my ancestors and to a family tradition that includes communal celebrations from holidays to birthdays. When I bake a pie, I step into and live out this story of food and family, hospitality and joyful eating.

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It's no accident that when speaking of food traditions I turn to my Grandmother. As the primary preparers of food historically (and often today), women have long been the keepers of such traditions and rituals. Discussing the role of Jewish women and food, scholar Susan Starr Sered notes that while men have been leaders of the public ritual roles, women's role in food preparation has given them their own place in shaping the religious life of generations. For centuries, women have made the *seudat mitzvahs,* the celebratory meals, as well as thoughtfully shopped, stored, and prepared foods to keep kosher. This is no small contribution to Jewish religious and cultural life—as Sered explains:

> "[I]n the current era of secularization and cultural globalization, women's holiday dishes have come to be seen as the very essence of Judaism for large numbers of Jews both in Israel and in the United States."

In this way, it is women's religious role of food preparation that significantly shapes Jewish religious and cultural identity for many today—even when the formal rituals cease to play a part in their lives. Recognizing this dynamic helps us to see just how important food and feasts can be in our sense of identity and how we fit into a larger story. And feeling like we fit into a larger story is often what helps give our lives a sense of meaning, of having a place in the world. Yes, food and feasting can do all that!

How about for you? What role does food and feasting play in your own holiday celebrations? In your religious life? What particular meals or food items will you prepare and/or eat this week? With whom will you eat them? Or, who will not be there that you will be thinking of as you look around the table or take a bite of in inherited recipe?

With their familiar scents and sounds, holiday meals can evoke deep emotions that can bind us together in the ritual of repeated food dishes, patterns of who sits where, and which jokes and stories emerge once again. Yet, in that familiarity, holiday meals can also remind us of the changes over the years as people join the celebrations or as people are no longer present due to death, divorce, disagreements, or because someone moved away. Such reminders may be bittersweet as fond memories emerge. And some reminders can be heartbreaking as still tender grief or anger floods our hearts.

Whether this holiday week brings joy or sorrow or the very human mix of both, my hope for us all is that we take time to notice the depth of the moments. When we are gathered around food in celebration, there is often more that is happening than a simple intake of calories. In such moments, the food becomes the tool by which we are making meaning. As we take a bite of the feast, we are often stepping into a larger story of family, of ancestry, and of religion. Food becomes a way not only to physically sustain one's life, but to also

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celebrate the gift of that life and of sharing that life with others. And as such, feasting reminds us of how we are a part of the interconnected web of life.

As a final note, you may be sitting there thinking, wait, but what about Unitarian Universalist religious feasts? One answer is that the openness of Unitarian Universalism welcomes the practices and feasts of many different religious traditions—which is why today we lit both the Christian Advent wreath and Jewish Menorah. And another answer is that coffee hour is our religious ritual of food. We gather in community to talk, to meet new people, and to deepen our connections with one another. It is a moment when we live out our covenant to unite for community in a spirit of love. Our First Parish ancestors even split the entire Meeting House into two levels to create the vestry below us where the congregation could gather in social community. So, as you head to coffee hour in a few minutes, I encourage us all to mindfully walk into the larger story of gathering in that space.

And, on that note, I finish today with a joke:

At show-and-tell day at school, the children are requested to bring in an item that illustrates their religious beliefs.
One child stands up and says,
"This is a Star of David and I am a Jew."
Another child stands up and says,
"This is a crucifix and I am a Catholic."
Another child stands up and says,
"This is a coffeepot and I am a Unitarian Universalist."

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