

## **“Food in a Shared World”**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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There is often a feeling you get when your belly is full. You feel safe and comfortable. You feel distant from any imminent, ongoing threat. Sometimes, there is simply a feeling of peace.

Yet, too often bellies remain empty with access to food disrupted by poverty, by drought, by war. Too often, peace feels like an impossible dream.

And yet, today’s UN Day seeks to remind us of the dream of peace. Notably, the path to creating a UN Day began as only a dream in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the first World War, a 1928 treaty known as the Paris Peace Pact called for the abolition of war and to solve conflict only by peaceable means. Remarkably, “By 1935, all but five sovereign nations in the world had signed the Pact,” according to a [report by Unitarian lawyer Frank B. Frederick](#).

Within just six years, conflict and the threat of violence had erupted between nations. When it did, no one evoked the forgotten Pact. Concerned by this swift rise into apathy, Frederick and his wife began to work towards a plan of an annual Peace Day to celebrate the great promise of the Pact. It was too late. The march to war, to another global war, had begun.

However, as World War II drew to a close, another effort to build structures to support global peace began to take shape. Seeing a second opportunity to establish a Day of Peace, Frederick, his wife, and many others, including the American Unitarian Association, jumped into action. As the newly chartered United Nations began to meet, petitions flowed in calling for a Peace Day to remind people year after year of the importance of these global structures of peace, the importance of avoiding war. Finally, in October 1947, the fall session of the second year of the United Nations, the General Assembly passed the idea of a peace day, calling for October 24 to be celebrated as the United Nations Day.

I knew none of this history until researching for this sermon. Did you? And yet, doesn’t it make a lot of sense? Following the worldwide rupture of war, the political energies were strong to create structures to foster communication and strong relationships between nations. Global relationships that just might help to avoid war.

But time has its own pull and the passions that generate new beginnings often fade. Perhaps, hoped Frederick, by remembering the beginning, by celebrating the goal of peace, the annual day might help us all—in nations across the globe—not forget just what was at stake.

And yet, here we are in 2021 amidst the global disruption of pandemic—a very different type of war. The great need for global cooperation remains evident. Sometimes the issues are just that big.

And while the pandemic certainly had dominated so many headlines for months now, the news also reminds us regularly of Climate Change—an issue of such magnitude that global cooperation is essential if there is hope for the all of us.

And we need hope.

Perhaps it's too late to simply hope for a “stop” to Climate Change. The storms, the rising seas, the devastation from floods and fires have wrought damage across the planet. Perhaps it's too late to hope that we will see a “fix” or a “return” in our lifetime. While the pace of response is increasing through treaties, technologies, and behaviors, it is still far behind the rate of change in the climate itself. So where then is the hope?

I find hope in the work of the nonprofit Land Institute in Kansas. For nearly two decades, they have been working to cultivate a [perennial grain, Kernza](#), that will grow again year after year. Starting with wild grains, they have been combining very old practices of seed selection with new scientific tools to accelerate the process of creating this grain, a new staple to help feed the world. Modern farming techniques are “[hugely carbon intensive](#)” with machinery to plow, plant, harvest, and transport crops. The new grain not only changes the inputs into the crop development, but the deep roots of the Kernza grain actually lock carbon into the soil. Rather than becoming a contributor to the planet's carbon load, Kernza could help lessen it while also helping to feed people.

There's hope in that.

And I acknowledge that there is also a lot of fear out there around food and climate. Fear of failed crops that cannot weather fire, flood, or drought. Fear that the food systems we have relied on in our region, nation, and globe are simply not sustainable in the face of climate change. Have you noticed the repeated shortages with avocados in recent years? Or do you recall last year in Massachusetts when unseasonable warmth caused apple trees to blossom only to freeze again so that months later in September the apple harvest was weak?

How often do you pause to consider the wonder of access to food in our daily lives? Have you ever moved among the rows of mounded boxes of apples at Verrill Farm and marveled? Or have you ever driven out west through the vast oceans of grains? Or perhaps you have flown over those odd circles of irrigated farms in the Southwest or California? And, maybe you've marveled at the beauty of your own backyard garden or the community garden you pass by near your home.

Sometimes it can be easy to forget the wonder of abundant food available to us—at least, available so far as we have the financial means to buy it, access to land to grow it, and/or functioning transport and retail systems not disrupted by war or Climate Change.

Before sliding too quickly from a place of wonder to the challenges that exist, let us pause to consider another place of hope. I find hope in the video we watched earlier of Soul Fire Farm Manager [Naima Penniman](#) sharing her love and wonder for the gift of seeds, of growing food, of being part of the food system rather than alienated from it. The description of the mission of Soul Fire Farm reads in part:

We raise and distribute life-giving food as a means to end food apartheid. With deep reverence for the land and wisdom of our ancestors, we work to reclaim our collective right to belong to the earth and to have agency in the food system. ...

Our food sovereignty programs reach over 10,000 people each year, including farmer training for Black and Brown growers, reparations and land return initiatives for northeast farmers, food justice workshops for urban youth, home gardens for city-dwellers living under food apartheid, doorstep harvest delivery for food insecure households, and systems and policy education for public decision-makers.

Soul Fire Farm is a place of hope.

Finding these places of hope give us fingerholds in the turmoil we all face in our shared world. Each of us *are* in relationship with the global community. While most of us may never be “in the room” of global decision making, we do impact the room by voting for national leaders who sit in the room. And, small as we are, Unitarian Universalists have a voice as a non-governmental organization at the United Nations. An office that survives in large part by support from congregations like ours and people like you. (Now I sound like a PBS ad!?)

Engaging in global issues directly or indirectly may never bring the kind of immediate impact for which we long. The apocalyptic threats we face cannot be easily solved by the

kind of action we see in a Marvel comics movie when the superheroes save the day. But neither is an apathetic drift into numb acceptance of what feels so far out of our control as individuals or local groups the only answer. Isn't there some middle ground between independently saving the world and giving up any role at all?

Perhaps one path to the middle ground might emerge through how we engage in the food system. We need food to survive, to hopefully fill our bellies. And how we eat is intertwined with a global food system—not to mention with a global weather system of increasing unpredictability and destruction. What if we just started by paying attention to our food not as a given, nor as a necessary chore but rather as a wondrous, fragile gift that needs to be protected—both locally and around the globe? And there are other steps we can take too. For example, in 2011, our UUA General Assembly affirmed a report on [“Ethical Eating”](#) to help guide our food choices. Moving more towards a plant-based diet can lessen the carbon impact of the meat industry, particularly methane producing cattle.

Even so, facing the magnitude of global issues like climate change can feel disheartening. As Frederick noticed in 1934, the best laid plans for a new path forward can devolve quickly into apathy and old patterns. For Frederick, designating an annual celebration that called people to remember the aims of peace could help keep the dream and the passion for that dream alive.

Today global peace is threatened in many ways, including the sustainability of our food systems in the face of climate change. While none of us can be the superhero to save us all, perhaps we might each take actions that together shift the direction of the future of our shared world. Whether we support or lobby those with the voices in global conversations or whether we simply pause at our next meal to feel grateful for the food on your plate, remembering our global relationships may help us to stay engaged in our shared future.

So may it be.  
Amen.