

“What’s on the Menu?”

Scripture: Genesis 1:28

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

Romans 14:15-21

If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.

How many people here believe in global warming? Not that you would know it by last winter, but the earth is getting warmer, so are the oceans and air because there are more greenhouse gases than ever before. One more question: “What’s the principal man-made source of greenhouse gases?” Well, The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has estimated that direct emissions from meat production account for about 18% of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions, Transportation, which includes all the cars in our parking lot, accounts for just 13% of humankind's greenhouse gas footprint.

I have a confession to make – I love cars. I know that comes as a big surprise given the car you see me drive. Look, I’ve always loved cars. I like reading about them, talking about them. I like driving them, I like to watch them race. I am fascinated with all the engineering and technology that goes into making cars faster, lighter, safer, more efficient, and perform better. I know there is an environmental cost, or “carbon consequence” to every mile I drive my car. I also know that I added to my greenhouse gas emissions when I used my car to get here today. However, I am not here to lecture about cars and their pollution.

As many of you know, I’ve been a vegetarian for the last 34 years. Let me briefly explain. When I was 18 and working on my parents cattle ranch in SW Alberta, I discovered firsthand one hot August day that I could not

kill an animal in order to eat. I also decided that I wouldn't ask someone else to do it for me. My decision to be a vegetarian was, and is, based my moral and ethical convictions about non-violence and on my place here amongst God's creatures. I've learned over time to add diet to my mother's list of religion and politics as sensitive topics not to bring up as a guest in someone else's house. Though I'm a guest here at Robbinsdale, with your permission I'd like to talk about diet and the cost of what's on our menu. Many of you are probably wondering what cars and food have to do with the Bible texts for today. Allow me to explain.

In Romans 14:20 Paul says "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat." What does this mean for our food choices and their consequences? First, I'd like to explore the greenhouse gas consequences of eating meat. Second, I'd like to share my view on what this scripture says to us about our use of the animals and plants on earth. I believe that what we eat has everything to do with our stewardship, or dominion of this earth.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Americans grow and kill nearly 10 billion animals a year. That's more than 15 percent of the world's total, even though America has only about 5 percent of the world's population. On a per capita basis, Americans eats approximately 200 pounds of meat, poultry and fish a year, which is 50 pounds more than we ate in 1955. I hasten to add that this number does ***not*** include the hundreds of millions of animals raised for dairy and egg production. About 75% of our protein comes from red meat, poultry and seafood. Think about the scale of this food machine we've created: there are 30 meat animals being raised in America right now for every man, woman and child. Every American is consuming about 2/3 of a pound of meat each day.

As I said earlier, there are carbon consequences in the form of greenhouse gases directly linked to the production of all this meat. These gases are emitted from 3 sources: the animals themselves, the crops grown to feed them and the energy burned to transport and process the meat. Do you really want to know how bad the consequences are? Are you sure? Let me show you: This (*present a "Big Mac" style hamburger box*) produces approximately the same amount of greenhouse gases as this (*present a 2 gallon gasoline container*). That's right, producing the meat in one "Big Mac" equals the burning of approximately two gallons of gasoline – and that doesn't even include the fries!

Here's a little more information. The National Institute of Livestock and Grassland Science in Japan estimates that this 2 pounds of meat (*showa 2 lb. frozen chicken pack*), produces the same amount of "greenhouse gas" as an average family car driven 155 miles. Every time people sit down to nice meal, it's like driving from here to Rochester, MN and back! Pamela Martin, an assistant professor of geophysics at the University of Chicago, calculated that if Americans were to reduce their meat consumption by just 20 percent, which would be the equivalent of having 4 meatless meals a week, it would be as if they all switched from a sedan, like a Toyota Camry to an ultra-efficient hybrid car like the Toyota Prius. To put it another way, a vegetarian could drive a gigantic, gas-guzzling truck up and down Lake Rd. here in Robbinsdale all day long and they would be producing fewer greenhouse gases than a meat-eater driving a small hybrid car, simply because they're not consuming any meat. **Just because we don't see the consequences of our food choices doesn't mean there isn't a real carbon cost.** If you saw that truck, you wouldn't miss its carbon footprint, would you? But truthfully, when was the last time you looked at a chicken breast and thought "Ha! A global warming culprit!"

This isn't just about us Americans, though. As a vegetarian, I promise you I don't feel smug or judge my neighbor. That's because the environmental consequences of our collective food choices affect human beings around the world, especially those with little or no say in what they eat or what happens to this planet. Though 800 million people worldwide now suffer from hunger or malnutrition, the majority of corn and soy grown in the world feeds cattle, pigs and chickens. According to Rosamond Naylor, an associate professor of economics at Stanford University, it takes about 200 to 500% more grain fed to an animal to get the same calories as you would get through direct grain consumption, because the animal is inefficient at converting the energy in grain into protein and fat. There is about 5 pounds of grain in a half a pound of grain-fed beef in the United States. Poultry takes less grain than beef to make a pound of meat, but it is not efficient, either.

Why do we continue growing all this grain and using all this energy so that we can have lots of meat? Well, God told us to do it – says so right in the first chapter of the Bible! In Genesis 1:28, scripture tells us that it is our right as human beings to use the earth in whatever way we want, doesn't it? "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." In Genesis, humans are given the power of

dominion over the plants and animals. However, when this was written approximately 2500 years ago, humans were not in dominion over the planet. Back then, the rest of creation had a huge lead in the contest for ecological supremacy. I don't believe that the people who wrote Genesis ever thought that humans would be able to dominate the planet; they were wondering how they were going to just survive until the next harvest came in. **Nowadays, we don't need to play the rest of the ecology game. In the 21st century, the score is humans: 6.5 billion, plants and animals: zero.** There is no doubt about who has control of the environment now.

I think the part of the problem has been our interpretation of the word "dominion." When I was 14, I was given the opportunity to become a Canadian citizen alongside my parents, who were both born and raised as Americans. One afternoon in June 1970, I went down to the courthouse in Vancouver B.C. and became a Canadian citizen. I swore allegiance to Queen Elizabeth of England because Canada was still part of the former British Empire. I remember the oath because it said the Queen had dominion over Canada. What did that mean? The dictionary says it comes from the Latin words *do-min-i-um*, meaning the power to use, enjoy and dispose of property. I interpret dominion as mindful stewardship, not destruction or thoughtless use. I believe dominion carries the weight of privilege that must be used responsibly.

Do you ever hear people say to you "I'm waiting for a sign from God," or "What do you think God wants us to do?" I hear all the time up at seminary. I may not know the Bible very well, but I think Paul's commandment in Romans 14, verse 20: "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God," **is about as clear and direct a message from God as I can ever hope to get on the subject of food choices.** Does anybody remember the Steve Martin movie "L.A. Story?" In it, he plays a TV weatherman who is trying to figure what to do with his life. The answers to his life questions literally appear on billboards along the freeway while he's driving. That's how I feel about this scripture from Romans - I can't miss its message. I believe if I put verse 20 up on a freeway billboard anywhere in America, everybody would know what I was trying to say: **Think before you eat!** Notice that Paul does not limit the harm we inflict by our thoughtless eating to just other people who don't have enough to eat. No, Paul brings in all of God's creation – the animals, plants, water, air, land - everything. I hear Paul asking us to reflect before we refeed, which means to eat and drink

According to Biblical scholars, the ancient Middle East was mostly a subsistence agriculture society. Only the rich and powerful had a secure, bountiful supply of food. Sort of sounds like today, doesn't it? The humans who read this scripture 2000 years ago lived in a world that was limitless but their life expectancy was very limited. Because there were so few humans back then, their dining choices had little or no consequence on the planet. Today, the situation is reversed. Thanks to our abundance of both food and technology, life expectancy in America is almost limitless, but now it is the world which is limited. Paul's commandment in Romans 14:20 and 21 that "it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble." says me to that **we must stop eating as if there is no tomorrow and nobody else at the dinner table**. I hear Paul calling us to use the resources God left in our care so that there will be food on the table for all of our brothers and sisters, human and animal. If we going to continue to multiply and fill the earth, we will have to figure how we are going to feed everyone, especially the last and the least, without draining the earth of its ability to sustain all of us. I believe that God gave us an awesome responsibility by leaving us in charge, including being in charge of change. I know I have to change. I have to reduce the impact I have on this planet by consuming less energy and using fewer resources. How am I doing in my changes? Well, I moved back into the city where I can walk to virtually everything I need or want, so I'm driving less. With my five children growing up and leaving home, my next car will be smaller and more efficient. As a faithful Christian, I believe I have to reduce my carbon footprint, which is hard because I still love cars and motorcycles, too – I always will.

What can we do as a people who are striving to live within God's creation? I believe that it's up to me and up to you to do what we can to make a difference. Please understand that I'm not suggesting all of you become vegetarians, but there are ways to reduce your greenhouse gas emissions. One big impact would be to eat a little less meat – perhaps eating it 5 meals a week instead of what you eat now.

If you did this, you be making a three-fold difference. First, you would be doing something good for your health and you carbon footprint. Second, you would be something magnificent for the future grandchildren of this country. Third, you'd be doing something extraordinary for those who don't have any power over what they eat or what happens to the planet. How each of us uses this planet has an effect on bringing to reality Paul's

“kingdom of God” in which we which we choose not to perpetuate irresponsible “food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”? When we ask ourselves “What will we choose to eat? What is on our menu?” we are exercising dominion over our place on this earth in such a way that we can be, as Gandhi said “Be the change you want to see in the world.”? Amen