

In 1801—the year that Thomas Jefferson was elected president of these United States—95% of Americans made their living from agriculture. By 1901 that percentage had been cut in half, to 45%, and then at the dawn of the third millennium, in 2001, only 2% of Americans made their living from farming. I am pretty certain that this information doesn't come as a great surprise to anyone here tonight. Those statistics correlate with the transformation of not only this nation, but what Tom Friedman has called our “flat” world, as we moved through the industrial revolution and into the technological age. Over the course of that time the people of the United States have moved from farms into cities and then into the suburbs and exurbs (whatever exactly those are!)

I share these statistics not because I am particularly nostalgic for a “better” or simpler time, but simply to point out the obvious: most of us here are more cut off from the land than our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were; not by conscious choice, but simply because the world has changed so much.

A few years ago I read a book called *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver. It's the story of how Kingsolver and her family spent one year as *locovores*. They wanted to eat food produced so close to home *that they would know the names of the people who produced that food*. My family is a long way from such a commitment. The lack of sun in the backyard of the rectory makes growing our own vegetables nearly impossible and it's a long winter here in New England if you aren't committed to canning or freezing vegetables in the fall.

But in the time since reading that book we have tried to become far more intentional about the food we buy and taken some steps in that direction. We buy our eggs and goat cheese and grass-fed beef from Hubbardston. We are part of a co-op throughout the summer months and into the fall and we even know the name of the woman who runs that farm with her husband and family, because she was one of my kids very first music teachers at Davis Hill School. As I've shared from this pulpit, it is because of people like Ethel that I have discovered just how well kale apparently does in the soil of this part of New England! But we get lots more than kale, and I have been reminded again and again this fall how much better locally grown carrots taste than those mass produced little baby carrots, even if the latter are convenient. Last year our Easter lamb came from a local farmer named Walt, in Princeton, and tomorrow's turkey comes from the same place.

Now it is probably not a very good idea for a preacher to spend so much time talking about food on the night before Thanksgiving, because perhaps my list of foods has reminded you that you forgot to buy the cranberries and now I'll never get your attention back because you are worried about having to make another trip to the store after church. Or you are thinking: did I leave the pumpkin pies in the oven and should I dial 911 immediately?

Why, then, am I talking about locally grown food? Because the reading from Joel that we heard tonight rings in my ears differently than it would have as recently as even two or three years ago. Because I hear Joel's words tonight with a much deeper sense of appreciation for this good earth. And I don't mean the good earth far away in Kansas or Nebraska or Idaho (although I'm sure that is perfectly fine!) but I mean the the earth we walk on, the soil underneath our feet here in Holden and in Rutland and Princeton and Paxton and Sterling and Worcester and Hubbardston. Joel says:

Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

Do not fear but be glad and rejoice! The earth is our Mother, as the native peoples of this land knew and understood and celebrated long before the arrival of the Pilgrims. But so, too, did the writer of Genesis understand that you and I are formed of the earth, born of clay and the breath of God—and in the great circle of life our bodies will, at death, return to the same clay from which we were formed. We have been called as stewards of this good earth—of the soil and trees and vineyards. We are called to care for the oceans and the rivers and hills and ozone layer and stars—not as inanimate objects that humans are meant to dominate but rather to find our place in creation that itself praises its Creator. The heart of our vocation as followers of Jesus Christ is this work of being co-creators with God who help care for this “fragile earth, our island home” and people like Ethel and Walt bear witness to that work. For far too long the soil, and the animals and the trees and the birds and the fish in the oceans have been afraid: afraid of us two-legged creatures who seem to constantly take and take and never give back.

But tonight as we gather we heard a word of hope, a Word of the Lord from the prophet Joel, a word of hope offered not only to us *but to the soil itself, and the animals and the trees and the birds*. Too often our theology is not only anthropocentric but ego-centric. We worry about ourselves and our own salvation. But the Biblical view, especially of the prophets, is cosmic and communal. It’s not about me or even us but the well-being of the planet. Joel says tonight that it is God’s plan that the soil itself and all creatures great and small should “rejoice and be glad.” Our Enlightenment selves might shudder at the notion of soil that praises God and is glad, but a people who take as their patron that saint from Umbria (who called the sun his brother and the moon his sister) should not be surprised at such language.

Tonight is a chance to remember the connections between our own bodies and this good earth and all that goes on our dinner tables tomorrow. Cranberries and pumpkin and turkey and potatoes and corn yams and onions and the fruit of the vine may come to us by way of the Big Y, but before that they come to us as gifts from the soil and its Creator. Tomorrow is a time for remembering, and for giving thanks for divine love and human labor. Most of us won’t know the names of the people who produced the food we enjoy but beyond those farmers are also the people who work in the factories and drive the trucks and unload them and people like Andrea and Rick and Jay who work extra hours at our grocery stores this week. We give thanks for a world that is interconnected and on this day especially we are invited to let go of the false and idolatrous notion that we are self-reliant by giving thanks to God for our *interdependence*. We rely for our daily bread on God’s grace and the work of human hands.

Let the whole world and all of creation rejoice and be glad! Thanksgiving is a national holiday but the heart of its meaning takes us to the heart of Christian faith. We are a Eucharistic people, and the word “eucharist” simply means thanksgiving. After this sermon and the offertory anthem featuring our newly dedicated bells, we’ll pray together the Great Thanksgiving. Every time we come to this table and light the candles and offer the bread and the wine and some percentage of the fruits of the labors of our lives, we make “great thanksgiving.” We come to get a foretaste of that eschatological banquet where there is always room for one more, and where there is room enough for everyone from every tribe and language and people and nation.

*Do not fear: soil or oceans or plants or animals or birds or fish or children or women or men. Let the whole earth rejoice, and be glad!*