

What's on the Menu?

by Blair Paterson

In our urban world we are losing touch with our rural roots. We are out of sync with the rhythms of life: birth and death, planting and harvesting, seasons and weather.

A Bible study on food and faith

Anyone who gardens knows it takes time for preparation of the soil, seed planting, germination, growth, and harvest. It is the rarest of commodities, our precious time. It is so important that we are paid not for what we produce, but for the time it takes to do our jobs. The author of the Book of James was well acquainted with the agony of waiting. In **James 5:7–12**, he uses the farmer as an example of the patience needed for the life of faith.

While many of us may not be acquainted with farming, all of us are deeply knowledgeable of the results: the food we eat. Food is a necessity for all of us: rich or poor, insider or outsider, male or female, free or slave. Jesus prayed, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). How does the patience of the farmer spill over into the lives of those who reap the benefits of fruitful harvests?

Psalm 46:10 may urge us to “be still,” but waiting is difficult business, especially in the lives of those who follow Jesus. It is very difficult to wait when so much needs to be done. Educator and Quaker Parker J. Palmer suggested this when he wrote about “functional atheism.”

...Functional atheism, [is] the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must

make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God. It often leads to burnout, depression and despair, as we learn that the world will not bend to our will and we become embittered about that fact...*

Are we functional atheists in the church? We say we believe in God, but do we act like it? Do we have the time to wait for God to answer? Many of the environmental and social disasters affecting our world can be traced to our impatience. We want what we want when we want it. Having created a world (or one third of a world) where this idea of *now* has come to fruition (at the expense of two thirds of the world), are we surprised that there is a cost to our impatience?

There are many questions: Where is our food coming from? Why is Canadian society becoming more obese and less healthy? Why are families spending less time at table together? We are living longer, but are we living better?

We take food for granted because it is always there. But what happens when we have to make the choice between medication and supper? We all have to eat, but do we have the patience to do so wisely?

*Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, Jossey-Bass, 1999, p. 88. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

LEADER PREPARATION

Consider researching agriculture of the ancient world and of your local area. You may want to invite a church-going farmer to attend the study to speak of his or her experiences.

Read the poems *Let Evening Come* by Jane Kenyon and *Ox Cart Man* by Donald Hall (www.poetryfoundation.org).

Make arrangements for refreshments—locally produced and fair trade, as available.

Gather Bibles for participants.

OPENING

Welcome the group. Invite all to the refreshments. Allow the group to mingle for a few minutes while everyone arrives.

Sing “The Garden Song” (“Inch by Inch, Row by Row”), or “Oats, Peas, Beans, and Barley,” or Linnea Good’s “Banquet Earth Grace.”

Have someone read aloud the two poems.

SCRIPTURE

Pass out Bibles. Read James 5:7–12.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are bumper stickers that read “Have you eaten today? Thank a farmer.”
 - What have you eaten so far today? How much of it was locally grown and/or produced? Do you know the person who grew the grains/vegetables or raised the livestock?

- In early agricultural societies, and not that long ago in Canada, food production, preparation, and storage, was a primary industry. How much do you know about the food you eat?
2. How patient are we?
- How many times have you ordered from a drive-through window this past week? In church, do many grumble when the worship service goes beyond an hour?
 - In the time of James, the early Christians were waiting for Jesus to return. They did a lot of waiting. How do you think they coped?
 - How do you cope with waiting in lines, in traffic, in emergency rooms, for children to keep up, for elders to catch on?
 - How do you cope with matters of faith when the answers are not forthcoming? The story of James is about waiting for Jesus to come again to bring justice.
 - How do you think our sisters and brothers who are suffering at home and around the world endure with patience for justice to come? For the living Jesus to be with them?
3. One of the most important themes in food management is crop

rotation. The farmer grows different crops on the same land to reduce the need for crop inputs (fertilizer, pesticides, etc.). The difficult part is that not all crops yield the same outputs or are not as valuable as others. The market often plays into this. A farmer may have to plant soybeans in a field, when it's corn that's very valuable this market season. So it is a matter of the interplay between "must do this" and "may do this."

- We all must eat. What can we do to make our food policies more equitable to producers locally and internationally?
4. Recently, a cattle producer witnessed a calf auctioned for \$4.
- How much do you pay for a pound of hamburger at the grocery store? This discrepancy between the producer and the grocer is legendary. However, in other industries, unions were formed to introduce fairer wages, benefits, and safer work environments. How much are you willing to pay for food that allows a living wage to producers?
5. As a group, discuss what you might do to continue exploring these issues. This could range from

looking into the rural ministry programs at Queen's Theological College to connecting with your Conference rural life committee (if one exists) or checking out the Canadian Rural Church Network (www.canadianruralchurch.net). Another option is to make contact with vendors at local farmers' markets and seek their input.

CLOSING

Sing together the hymn "We Plough the Fields" (*Voices United* #520).

Close in prayer, such as the following:

Providing God, remind us once again that at the centre of our faith stands a table where all have a place. As we feast from your goodness, help us share what we have been given with those who are at the far end, and with those we bump elbows with. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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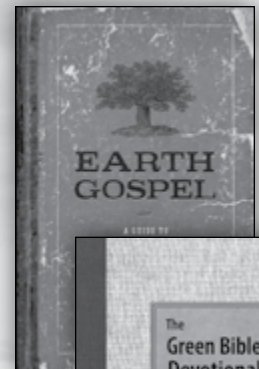
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