

FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Food Supply by Jill M. Johnson



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major disruption in the food supply chain in the United States. Why did these problems occur and how can we fix them in the future? How does our faith affect the way we view our relationship to food and agriculture?

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The Paradox of Hunger and Food Waste

According to the nonprofit Feeding America, more than 37 million people struggle with hunger in the United States, including more than 11 million children. This is one reason it was so troubling this spring to see news reports of food being destroyed as the COVID-19 virus hit our country. As the pandemic continues to play out and affect the economy, even more people will face food insecurity.

So why did farmers and ranchers have to throw out otherwise good food and meat while millions go hungry? Why was it so hard to get food where it was most needed?

In the United States, most of us go to the grocery store or eat at a restaurant without much thought about the specifics of our food supply chain. We don't really question where it originated or how it got delivered. However, as social distancing measures went into effect and we started to store up on necessary groceries and supplies, shelves emptied quickly. Food bank customers also faced long lines and limited choices. Our supply chain began to fall apart.

Author Michael Pollan, an expert on food issues, explained the breakdown in a May 12 article titled "The Sickness in Our Food Supply" published in *The New York Review of Books*. Pollan explains that what we might call the "pile it high and sell it cheap" supermarket model failed us as the pandemic started. Laws passed in the 1980s during President Reagan's administration allowed for a wave of

mergers and acquisitions in the food industry. This made the industry more concentrated while also making it more specialized, “. . . with a tiny number of large corporations dominating each link in the supply chain.”

“Today the US actually has two separate food chains, each supplying roughly half of the market. The retail food chain links one set of farmers to grocery stores, and a second chain links a different set of farmers to institutional purchasers of food, such as restaurants, schools, and corporate offices,” Pollan explains. When COVID-19 hit, demand in grocery stores skyrocketed while institutional demand dwindled. In response, this second supply chain collapsed because it was unable to pivot quickly enough to reroute food from institutions to grocery stores.

REFLECT:

- In what ways are you aware of food insecurity in your community?
- Have you ever thought about all the steps involved in getting food from a farm to your table? Explain your understanding of the process.
- How did pandemic-related food shortages affect you and your family?

Limited Food Staples

If you had problems this spring acquiring foods that are normally in abundance, you were not alone. In a National Geographic article from May 19, Sarah Gibbens examined why beef, milk, eggs, potatoes, and leafy greens were so hard to get to consumers, even if they weren't necessarily in short supply.

Restaurants are key buyers of meat, and the long shutdown caused major losses for the beef and pork industries. While demand for beef at grocery stores spiked sharply, the demand wasn't enough to offset the loss of restaurant orders for higher quality cuts of meat. Because different beef producers cater to different markets, they couldn't redirect those sales quickly. Meat producers eventually had to slaughter animals as overall demand

dropped sharply. To make matters worse, meat-packing plants were hit hard by COVID-19 as thousands of workers tested positive for the virus, disrupting the supply chain even more.

For dairy producers, the problem was largely an issue of packaging. Decreased demand from schools and restaurants meant millions of gallons of milk had to be dumped every day. Packaging centers that have supplies for school milk cartons don't necessarily have grocery store jugs in stock. For eggs, about 30 percent are sold in liquid form. As demand from institutions dropped, producers had to destroy liquified eggs. In an effort to cut losses, at least one large corporation euthanized 61,000 chickens because they could not switch quickly enough from liquid to whole-egg sales.

Drop in institutional demand for potatoes, on the other hand, caused a glut. Farmers gave away potatoes for free or plowed their fields under. For leafy greens and other fresh produce, demand dropped at both the restaurant and retail level, likely because consumers were buying items that had a longer shelf life. These farmers also had to destroy crops. Ironically, small-scale farms fared better because they had more flexibility to meet demand for small orders and home deliveries of fresh produce.

REFLECT:

- If you experienced shortages in foods you frequently buy, how did you respond to these shortages? Did it make you worry or feel the need to hoard the food you could find?
- What are your thoughts on the pitfalls of our once seemingly efficient food system? How do you think some of these problems could be resolved?

The Miracle of Food

In the creation story in Genesis, it's made clear that God delights in all of creation, including the food we eat, declaring it all good. Genesis 1:29 reads, “Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours

for food” (NIV). It’s clear that God cares as much about our physical health as our spiritual health. For God, the two are forever intertwined.

In a June 2010 interview with podcaster Krista Tippett, professor and author Ellen Davis reminds us that we are charged with “skilled mastery” of food and animals, not “dominion.” As such, “We are the one creature that is conscious that everybody has to eat,” says Davis. She continues that we are waking up “from a long period of obliviousness about what we eat” as well as the “lack of awareness that eating has anything to do with our life with God.”

Jesus expanded our notion of bread when he said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48). Christ is our

sole source of sustenance. We also told about miracles, such as the time Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes or the inexhaustible supply of oil and flour found in 1 Kings, do not happen without our participation. Sharing food is the catalyst for each miracle. In his article “The Parables of Jesus,” professor and author John Dominic Crossan put it this way: “No wonder we prefer to emphasize a miraculous multiplication that we want but cannot obtain rather than a just distribution that we can obtain but do not want.”

REFLECT:

- How is God calling you to be more generous with your possessions, food or otherwise?
- What does “bread of life” mean to you?

Food Waste in the United States

According to SWEEP, which stands for Solid Waste Environmental Excellence Protocol, many of the nation’s 2,000 landfills will reach maximum capacity by 2035. How can we delay this unnerving reality? One part of the answer lies in our refrigerators and our pantries. Food is the largest single source of waste in the United States, making up 20 percent of what goes into municipal landfills, surpassing plastic and paper.

Once we become attuned to food waste, it becomes more and more obvious how often we throw away uneaten or expired food. With this in mind, it’s important to be cognizant of all the resources that went into growing, processing, and transporting a food item that we eventually let go to waste.

So what can you do to change your habits and make a positive difference? Start with taking inventory of your refrigerator and pantry before going shopping and consider planning out meals for the week. This will help you ensure that you only purchase what you need. Do some research on proper food storage conditions to help extend the shelf life of your products. Rearrange your refrigerator to make room for an “eat me first” section so that perishable food doesn’t get lost in the back of your fridge.

If you still can’t finish your plate at dinner or if your food has expired, composting is the best alternative over the trash. Your city may have a composting initiative that you can take part in. Again, knowledge is power, so be mindful of your habits.

REFLECT:

- What changes can you make to decrease the food waste in your household?
- How can those changes be a spiritual practice for you?

Core Bible Passages

In Matthew 6:11, Jesus teaches us to ask God for our daily bread. This focus on daily bread helps us focus on the gift of the present moment and not on tomorrow's worries. When the Israelites were given manna to eat in the wilderness, they were also given a lesson on the dangers of a scarcity mindset. Exodus 16:18 says, "The ones who had collected more had nothing left over, and the ones who had collected less had no shortage. Everyone collected just as much as they could eat." Those who tried to hoard some of it for the next day found that it became infested with worms.

We also see evidence of God's provision in 1 Kings 17:7-16 when Elijah promised the widow that if she would make him bread with the last of her flour and olive oil, it wouldn't actually be the last. In verse 16 we're told that "The jar of flour didn't decrease nor did the bottle of oil run out, just as the Lord spoke through Elijah."

In the New Testament we read more stories of sustenance, a reminder that God's love and grace never run out. Jesus turned water into the best wine at the wedding in Cana so that the celebration could continue (John 2:1-11). Out of compassion, he turned fives loaves and two fish into enough to feed 5,000 people (Matthew 14:13-20).

REFLECT:

- How do you reconcile the biblical stories of God's provision with the knowledge that millions of people across the globe go hungry every day?
- How can we as Christians do a better job of buying just what we need so that food is not wasted?

United Methodist Perspective

In church, we think of everything in terms of our understanding of God, but we rarely consider how our beliefs about God speak to our thoughts on food. In an attempt to answer that question, the School of Ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina developed a DVD series study called, "What we eat and why it matters: Exploring a theology of food." The study's accompanying guide explains the value of Christians discussing how food intersects with our faith lives.

This curriculum points out that food is at the center of our worship and prayer lives. Whether you call it Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist, this sacrament is centered around food and drink. We speak of food when we recite the Lord's Prayer. Two of the primary themes in the Old Testament are agriculture and care of the land. In Luke's gospel, it is only after Jesus breaks the bread on the road to Emmaus that the disciples recognize him.

Food is intertwined with our personal well-being, but also the health of our community. This guide reminds readers that, "When we eat, we are connected with a whole line of people who grew or raised, picked or slaughtered, processed, transported, and maybe even cooked the food for us." The writer asks the question, "Do we remember in our prayers and mission work the people who make our meals possible?"

REFLECT:

- Consider the last question in this section. Have you stopped to pray for food workers during the COVID-19 pandemic? What other ways can the church show them our gratitude?
- Do you see food as a commodity or a gift from God? Discuss your views.

Helpful Links

- A video titled “Inside America’s Food Supply Chain Under Covid-19” by *Forbes* news: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOJ3In6RUaA&feature=youtu.be>
- How the food supply chain was impacted specifically in the New York City area, a video by *The New Yorker*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abCp9bc7UKk&feature=youtu.be>
- An example of one organization, Food Recovery Network, that fights food waste: https://youtu.be/z954lX_T4IM
- Find the study guide and videos for “What we eat and why it matters: Exploring a theology of food” here: <https://www.episdionc.org/video-curricula/>

About the Writer

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and member of Bethany United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas.*

Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Adoption

by Kira Austin-Young

While the concept of adoption is familiar to most people, the specifics of adoption are less commonly understood. What are the different scenarios that lead to adoption? What are some of the complicating factors? How does our faith help us sort through these issues so that we can support both adoptees and adoptive parents?



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Opening Prayer

Creator God, our first encounter with you was in a garden. You still intend to walk with us in the garden, even though our world is broken. Help us to be mindful of where our food comes from and how it is a gift from you. As we discuss this topic today, lead us to a better understanding of our connection to earth and all its bounty. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand (or encourage participants to use smartphone Bible apps) and a marker-board and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own. Invite participants to take a moment to take a few deep breaths in and out. Spend a few moments in silence before praying.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Be prepared to conduct your class remotely through programs such as Google Hangouts Meet or Zoom.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Set aside some time for spiritual reflection. Ask each participant to keep a journal, for at least one week. Ask them to write down their worries for the day each morning, and then at night to record at least one instance of “daily bread,” where they saw God providing what they needed to get through the day. Those who wish to share their journaling experience can do so at the next class meeting.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

Even if your class is still practicing social distancing, you can participate in a Theology of Food activity. Consider modifying the activity below so that it can be done via video-conferencing or in another safe, socially distanced manner:

Before you gather, have each participant prepare a meal for themselves. Ask each participant to choose foods that are locally sourced or representative of their region. The meal can include both meats and produce. As you are meeting, ask each person to share why they chose the foods they did and the path these items likely took to get to their plate.

Closing Prayer

Close by singing or reciting “Be Present at Our Table, Lord,” found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, #621:

Be present at our table, Lord;
 be here and everywhere adored;
 thy creatures bless, and grant that we
 may feast in paradise* with thee. Amen.
 (*or fellowship)