

## You Are Not What You Eat

Readings: 'Catechism' by Betsy Sholl  
'The Heavy Bear Who Goes with Me' by Delmore Schwartz  
'Blossom' by Mary Oliver

How easy it would be the answers for everything, including how to eat were written on the side of a mountain for all to see. But that is not the world we have. We get to muddle through, asking one another, the teachings of science, wisdom traditions, and looking inward to find the answers we seek to all questions big and small.

Today, as we approach what I've heard some call the winter eating season, I'm preaching on gluttony and related topics, as part of our worship series on the seven deadly sins and the seven heavenly virtues. I don't believe that the holy pulls strings in our lives, but I have to tell you that whatever higher power there might be has quite a sense of humor this week, as I wrote this sermon while recovering from food poisoning or something like it, wanting to think about anything but food.

Food is hard for many of us. It can be a source of power and pain. Many of us have complicated, contradictory relationships with food. And that's often linked with complicated, contradictory relationships with our bodies. We have been told by the world and by people that we trust that if parts of our bodies were bigger or smaller or there was less of us or more of us we'd be more worthy of love. We'd matter more. We'd be more important. And so many of us have internalized these voices and now repeat them as our self-talk. If only my body was different... If only I lost weight... If only.

And if you hear only one thing today, let it be this, you are not what you eat. Your worth is unrelated to a number on a scale or the size of your pants. We are our bodies and we transcend them. All of our bodies are precious and powerful.

As I address gluttony, I'm not going to tell you to eat this or not that. Nutrition science is trying to answer those questions for us and I have no particular insight, except to share that nutrition science is exceptionally difficult.

Alan Levinovitz, a scholar who approaches Americans' relationship with food from a religious studies perspective writes about how hard nutrition science is to do well, how we're always seeing studies that contradict themselves, 'The problem here is that running a few studies doesn't "prove" or "conclusively show" *anything*. Good nutrition science depends on the long slow accumulation of data over many, many studies, something scientists themselves know very well. They are highly skeptical—or should be—of single studies, in part thanks to a celebrated paper by Stanford professor John P.A. Ioannidis [entitled] "Why Most Published Research Findings are False." Ioannidis's conclusion, helpfully summarized in the paper's title, explains what's really happening with the steady stream of scientific reversals on butter, wine, or whatever food appears in the latest headline: *In truth, there are no reversals occurring, because nothing was ever established in the first place...*

Paradoxically, our faith in science makes it difficult to identify and dismiss lies about nutrition. Food seems simple to study. If we can put a man on the moon, transplant a heart, and manipulate DNA, then surely we can unpack the relationship between eating vegetables and living longer. There's no *obvious* difficulty in figuring out if wine decreases the risk of heart disease, or if red meat increases the risk of colon cancer.

Just look at people who drink wine or eat red meat, and then compare them to those who don't. Easy, right?

In fact, there is probably no branch of medicine more difficult or complicated than nutrition science, a complexity that plays out in the endless controversies about what—and how much—we should eat. High-quality studies of dietary practices are incredibly hard to design. How do you make a placebo piece of steak for your control group? Studies on the effect of diet and lifestyle in large populations are no less difficult. They depend on recollections and self-reporting, notoriously unreliable data. And even if that data were accurate—well, just tweak an equation, exclude a set of data points, isolate a different factor, and suddenly vegetarianism goes from increasing longevity to decreasing bone density.<sup>1</sup>--

The questions that I want to explore today are not what we should eat, but how can food be a source of joy and connection? How can we use food to promote our values? How can we feel more at home in our bodies and in the world?

So if we can't trust the nutrition scientists, who can we trust? There aren't any magical diets out there, but there is advice for how to approach food in healthy, life-giving ways. One resource is the American Academy of Pediatrics. Earlier this fall, this professional group released guidelines for how to help children and adolescents avoid eating disorders, other unhealthy practices, and I would add, the pain of not feeling worthy. While these guidelines are for young people, I believe we can all try them. The first guideline is no diets. The more a person diets, the more likely they are to develop unhealthy eating habits or disordered eating. When a person diets, so much energy, so much attention, is given to food. It becomes a realm of power and control, especially if other parts of life feel uncontrollable. Being mindful of food—eating when one is hungry, not when one isn't and trying, generally, to be healthy is a much better path than dieting and strict restrictions.

The second guideline is to have family meals. It is important for us to eat together with our families and others we love, to have food be a source of community and connection as well as physical nourishment.

The third guideline is no weight talk. This is a hard one for many of us. If we notice that someone in our lives has lost weight, we might want to offer them a compliment. We might complain about how if we only lost a few more pounds, our clothes would fit again. Children and others hear this and it teaches them that weight matters a lot, that it is something to fret over, it is something to monitor. Weight talk, even when it is meant as a compliment, promotes unhealthy relationships to food and our bodies. It is better for ourselves and our children for us to talk about health rather than weight. Ever since I read these guidelines a few months ago, I've been trying to wean myself from talking about weight. It's more challenging than I expected. I'm so used to talking about weight.

The final, related guideline, is no weight-related teasing. This sort of teasing is often meant with love and affection. Intentions might be positive and loving, but we know that intention is not impact; our intentions do not determine if our actions are hurtful. Weight-related teasing again reinforces that the size of our bodies are worthy of our attention, are what matters most. It, again is tied to an increase in unhealthy practices.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Levinovitz, Alan. *The Gluten Lie and Other Myths about What You Eat*. New York: Regan Arts, 2015. pages 17-19

<sup>2</sup> Conason, Alexis. 'No More Diets... and Other AAP Recommendations.' *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/eating-mindfully/201609/no-more-diets-and-other-aap-recommendations>

Food is a powerful force in our lives. We need it to survive. As I have mentioned already, food can too easily become a source of pain, disorder, and illness. Food is also a realm in which we enact our deeply held values – values like purity and justice.

Food choices have long been a way to ritualize purity, both on an individual level and as a way to drawing boundaries between communities. Food is an easy tool to mark who is inside and who is outside. Difference is often described in the language of food. Anthropologists have collected dozens of food-based insults that groups have used to label other groups, to draw firm boundaries between us and them. These include “cannibals,” “pork eaters,” “sweet potato eaters,” “turtle eaters,” “frog eaters,” “locust eaters,” and “elephant eaters.”<sup>3</sup> We describe who is foreign by highlighting how their food practices are different than ours.

Additionally, almost every wisdom tradition has rules about what is acceptable to eat. Hindus don't eat beef. Catholics, traditionally, avoided meat on Fridays. Muslims follow halal dietary practices and Jews keep kosher. Many of these rules have served, historically, to draw a clear boundary between who is part of a particular group and who is not, as dietary laws can require much care and attention to follow. In practice, kashrut made it hard if not impossible for Jews to share a meal with people outside their faith. That is one way to preserve a community in the face of overwhelming oppression and pressure to assimilate.

We also enact personal notions of purity in how we eat. There are, of course, people who avoid gluten or peanuts or so many other things out of medical necessity. Their diet needs to be pure of allergens or irritants for them to be able to exist in the world. I'm not talking about that, but about the things we avoid to help us feel pure and moral. I have lived this. For over two years in my early adulthood, I stopped eating apples. I had spent a few summers working with farmers and farm workers in Central Washington State and saw the horrible conditions endured by people who harvest apples, cherries, hops, and other fruits and vegetables. Every time I ate an apple, I was reminded of people sick from overexposure to pesticides and people living in makeshift camps because there was no affordable housing. I stopped eating apples, so I wouldn't have to be reminded of the people who suffered so I could eat. I purified myself of that issue. It took me too long to realize that my action didn't actually help anyone, that I wasn't motivated by compassion, but by purity. My decision to not eat apples didn't improve farm worker's living conditions; it only made it so I didn't have to think of them. Confusing compassion and purity is a trap that those of us in privilege have to be wary of. Not eating apples was not compassion; it was an attempt to free myself from the contaminant posed by being in relationship with people who were suffering so I could buy cheap produce. Separating ourselves from others' suffering and alleviating others' suffering are not the same thing.

There are, however, ways to use our personal food choices to make our values real in the world. Unlike my avoidance of apples, these are efforts that are organized and have real impact. They are about making change, not personal purity. When people join together, we are more powerful than we can ever be alone. One of these efforts to make our food system more just can be found in our Foyer every Sunday. The coffee we serve here—and the coffee and chocolate we sell here—are fair trade. We know that people who produce it are treated and compensated fairly. That is how we use choices about food to make the world better.

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<sup>3</sup> Levinovitz, page 14

And, I hope, we can also use food to make our lives more joyful. We can remember that we are not what we eat – we are more than that. Our bodies are precious and powerful and do not determine our worth as humans. We can nourish our powerful and precious bodies and experience joy. So as the winter eating season commences, I want you to remember that our bodies are precious and powerful, and to find nourishment and joy in what you eat.

We know that mainstream American culture promotes an unhealthy relationship with food and bodies. We also know that there are other food cultures that show us another way is possible. Psychologist Paul Rozin conducted an experiment that illustrates this. People from America and France were asked to word associate with “chocolate cake.”

“The Americans chose ‘guilt’ and the French chose ‘celebration,’” Rozin recounts. “There’s a serious difference between our food cultures, which we’ve shown again and again, and it doesn’t come down to scientific evidence that we’ve got and they don’t.”<sup>4</sup>

What would it look like to embrace another approach to food, a celebratory approach? To view our dietary indulgences as chances for celebration, not guilt? It would mean that, as we prepare for Thanksgiving and other winter gatherings, we anticipate the plates of turkey and potatoes and cranberries and pie or whatever it is that you will be eating as celebration and connection, not calories; as gratitude not guilt; as joy, not weight. It would mean that we eat because we’re hungry, not that we’re, in the words of theologian Frederick Beuchner, “raid[ing] the icebox for a cure for spiritual malnutrition.” It would mean that we know, in our heart of hearts, that however much we or others eat – and whatever size our bodies or others’ bodies are—we are precious and we are powerful.

And our young adult group has given us a chance to eat today –together—in a way that promotes our values. When the service ends today, let us eat together at their fundraiser for the Standing Rock water defenders. Let us know that food can be nourishment and joy and a way to make our values real in the world. Let us fuel our bodies for the important work ahead.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Levinovitz, page 97