THE FUTURE OF FOOD

NORMAN WIRZBA

How we think about the future of food depends on where we stand. Walk into a typical American suburban grocery store and the future looks very bright. Food abounds, much of it attractively packaged and displayed. The variety can even be a bit overwhelming—just ask someone from a developing country who visits our stores for the first time—as consumers are invited to select their purchases from among roughly 30,000 - 40,000 different food products. But happily, the prices are fairly low, reflecting the fact that today's industrial eater is likely spending a smaller percentage of income on food than any generation in the world's history. For many Americans, today's food is cheap, convenient, and available in copious supply.

Are we living in a mirage? There are reasons to think so. If we move a few miles into an inner city neighborhood, the future looks rather different. Food choice and food quality have simply evaporated, prompting some to call these places "food deserts" or, perhaps more accurately, "food swamps." For many of today's urban poor the choice of what to buy and eat is limited to fast food joints or the most highly processed products sold at gas stations and convenience stores. If fruits and vegetables are available at all, they tend to be of the lowest quality. Unsurprisingly, poor food choice coupled with limited health care means that today's urban poor will have to endure a variety of nutrition-related diseases.

If we move a few miles beyond the city and into farmland, the picture changes again. If the farm is a conventional one—meaning it is a farm focused on growing a small number of commodities (corn, soy, wheat, poultry, beef) in massive amounts—we may find a mix of optimism and concern. There is room for optimism because yields have grown dramatically in the last few decades, resulting in an explosion of food calories that is today feeding billions of people. Improved seed varieties, synthetically produced fertilizers, increased irrigation, and the capture of more land for agricultural purposes mean that we now produce more food than anytime in the world's history. In the minds of industrial ag boosters, there are few limits to how much food can be grown. Today's machine, transportation, and biological technologies—most notably genetic technologies—along with various efficiency measures will allow us to grow and market more crops and calories in all sorts of conditions.

But there is also considerable cause for concern because these food calories are coming at a very high—mostly hidden—cost: soil is eroding and being degraded by massive applications of synthetic, fossil-fuel dependent fertilizers and toxic herbicides; competition for fresh water is becoming more intense while available resources are being contaminated or wasted; animals are being abused so that consumers can have the cheapest meat and dairy products; antibiotics are becoming less effective in human populations because they are so widely used to fatten animals in confinement feeding operations; and farmworkers and food service providers are increasingly finding themselves in positions where they are being denied a living wage, worker benefits, or basic worker protections. Notwithstanding the massive amount of food production, there is also the dispiriting fact that still roughly one billion people do not have access to the food they need (another billion are suffering the ill-health effects of the bad consumption practices linked to today's industrial diet).

We might move down the road a bit and visit one of several small farm operations committed to natural systems or organic agriculture. These sorts of farms are on the rise because more and

more consumers are asking that land, water, animals, and workers not be degraded. They are selling their produce at a growing number of Farmer's Markets or through Community Supported Agriculture ventures that put consumers in direct contact with producers. Organic farmers have a hard row to hoe, however, because it is difficult to grow a lot of food without the use of synthetic poisons, hormones, and steroids, all the while paying workers higher wages. Not enough consumers are willing to ask about, let alone pay, an honest price for good, nutritious, clean, and just food.

If we move off the American mainland to one of the many developing countries growing food for the industrial, global market we discover the erosion of "food democracy," the idea that people should be able to determine for themselves what they will grow and eat. Owing to a variety of trade agreements, or simply feeling the pressure of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, farmers are growing commodities for export rather than food for their families and communities. Poorer farmers are losing their land to large (often foreign-owned) farms, to national projects (like dams or mines), and to foreign governments that are cash rich but soil poor. Many of these farmers end up in the burgeoning slums of mega-cities where they barely earn enough to eat. This is why even a slight rise in food prices is enough to spark riots in many parts of the world.

My quick tour through several food locations shows that the future of food is uncertain for many people. No doubt those who have resources and power will continue to enjoy good food for years to come. But many others, perhaps a growing majority, will find themselves food insecure as they fall victim to the many (potential and current) crisis points that turn production success into failure: a steep rise in fossil fuel prices, extreme weather (flooding, droughts, irregular frost cycles, migrating pests), ecosystem degradation or collapse, loss of glacier and snow melt, political instability, war and terrorism, and the spread of many food-borne diseases like salmonella, e coli 0157:H7, and various strands of influenza.

The future of food ought to be of central concern to Christians, particularly when we recall that the provision of food is one of the

most basic ways God demonstrates his love and faithfulness. Beginning in the Garden of Eden, when God the Gardener first lifts soil so close as to breathe the breath of life in it, God has been growing vegetation that is "pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). As the Psalmist declares, it is God who makes "springs gush forth" and "grass to grow" so that food can be brought forth from the earth (Psalm 104:10-15). The God who creates the world is also the God who daily provides for it. God is first and foremost a hospitable God, the One who makes room for others to be themselves and then nurtures them with food and love so that they can fully realize their God-given potential. Food is never simply a commodity. It is the material expression of God's passion for creaturely life. We could say that food, viewed theologically, is God's love made delectable. When God's creatures go hungry it is an affront to the character of God as the One who provides.

This is why we should not be surprised that Jesus made eating and the feeding of people a central part of his ministry. While researching for my book, *Food and Faith,* I read a commentator who said that in Luke's gospel Jesus is either coming from a meal, at a meal, or going to a meal. The providing and sharing of food are of supreme importance because in them we share much more than a few calories: we share the means of life itself. Jesus ate with everyone, even those on the margins considered to be beyond the pale of respectability, because welcome at the table, along with the nurture of good and nutritious food, is a tangible and tasty sign of the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Christians return regularly to the Lord's Eucharistic table so that they can there receive the nurture of God—recall that Jesus in John 6 referred to himself as the Bread of Life—and be transformed into the "food" that will nurture the world.

It is not a stretch to say that Christian life has always been about the future of food. Food is the medium of all life. Without food creation would come to a halt. That means it is an abiding and intimate concern of God that the creatures of the world be fed. As followers of God we have a great responsibility to attend to the sources of food and the practices of eating. Given the diverse picture

of food security and insecurity with which I began this essay, it is clear that Christians have considerable work to do. It is work that needs to happen on multiple levels: we need to pay much more attention to the ecological contexts that support all food production, making sure that remedial and restoration efforts are put in place where ecosystems testify to human abuse and degradation; we need to make the practices and economics of agricultural life a specifically theological and church concern, recognizing that policies like the Farm Bill and international trade agreements have major implications for the way land, water, plants, animals, and fellow human beings are treated and fed; we need to rectify the many injustices—ranging from immigration policy to worker wages and benefits—that are at work in our food production and food service industries; and we need to work hard to make our food clean, fair, and safe.

For centuries the vast majority of people understood that food is not to be taken for granted. It is a fragile and vulnerable gift that is susceptible to failure, disruption, and abuse. As Christians our abiding task is to bear witness to the God who daily feeds creation, and in this feeding reveals the hospitable character of the divine love. It is to participate in and extend—in the production, distribution, sharing, and consumption of food—that love to a world that too often experiences hunger and want.

Norman Wirzba, Ph.D., is Research Professor of Theology, Ecology, and Rural Life at Duke Divinity School and Research Professor of Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment. He is author of several books including, most recently, Making Peace with the Land *and* Food and Faith.