

Sermon - July 5, 2026
James 1:12-25

Our summer theme is focused on the table and its many uses and meanings. In this sermon, I will draw on a few different perspectives on the significance of the table – a Jewish perspective, an Inuit perspective, and a Buddhist perspective. Each of these perspectives, while very different from each other, honour the table as a holy meeting place and food as a source of physical and spiritual nourishment.

The table is set for family, friends and guests. The table, what is served on it, and how we eat, is a reminder of our identity – of our history, our culture, our faith, and the way we try to live ethically in harmony with God’s creation. The table is a symbol of generosity and community. It is an invitation to peaceable living – to breaking bread with the neighbour and the stranger.

The table provides a space for hospitality and a space to receive love and care and to try new things. When we come together at the table it is sometimes to resolve conflict or to make plans or to share our stories with another. The table also exposes privilege – who has enough at the table and who is left hungry? Does the table have seats for everyone? Can people come to the table with the confidence that their dietary restrictions or religious observances will be taken into consideration?

In our church, our communion table invites us to remember how Jesus once ate with his friends before his death and that his body and his blood are still offered to us as symbols of his reconciling love.

In our scripture passage from James, we are told in no uncertain terms to be doers of the Word, not just hearers of words. The Word is like manna from heaven – spiritual nourishment that we are to ingest and turn into fuel for walking the walk of righteousness.

James teaches us that some may hear the Word, but don’t digest it fully. James says: “anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at her face in a mirror and, after looking at herself, goes away and immediately forgets what she looks like” (1:23-24). When we listen to the Word and do the Word, our true nature is revealed in the mirror and we are able to remember who we truly are as made in the image of God.

James’ language is Jewish in nature, connecting the Word with the Law. He says: “whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do” (1:25).

James focuses on the Word as the Law which sets us free when we follow it. I think that too often we think of the Law as a set of restrictions – you can't eat this, you can't do that, etc. But James sees the Law as a source of liberation.

We Christians sometimes miss this life-giving aspect of the Law and think that Jesus came to release us from its bondage. But when I look at *kashrut*, or kosher food laws, I see a devoted people ideally approaching food with intentionality and eating as an act of holiness, like digesting the Word. Eating with intention connects us with God's creation and reminds us of all the ways that God provides. Psalm 19 says that the law "revives the soul" (verse 7) and Psalm 119 says that the Law is a source of delight, life and light.

Jonathan Safran Foer is a Jewish American writer and filmmaker. One of his books, made into a documentary, is entitled *Eating Animals*. It is about his decision to become a vegetarian for ethical purposes.

The book starts with a true story about his grandmother as a young girl, running from the Nazis. She had been separated from her family and was forced to hide in people's barns for shelter. She was often sick from eating rotten food scraps, but also learned survival tips from sympathetic strangers, like tying up the bottom of her pants so that she could store more stolen potatoes.

Towards the end of the war, she was close to death for lack of food and a Russian farmer took pity on her. This is the conversation that the writer, Jonathan, had with his grandmother about this moment in her life:

Grandma said: "A farmer...God bless him, he saw my condition, and he went into his house and came out with a piece of meat for me."

Jonathan said: "He saved your life."

Grandma said: "I didn't eat it."

Jonathan said: "You didn't eat it?!"

Grandma said: "It was pork. I wouldn't eat pork."

Jonathan said: "Why?"

Grandma said: "What do you mean why?"

Jonathan said: "What, because it wasn't kosher?"

Grandma said: "Of course."

Jonathan said: "But not even to save your life?"

Grandma said: "If nothing matters, there's nothing to save."¹

Despite the threat of starvation in highly traumatizing circumstances, Foer's grandmother chooses to abide by the kosher laws that are intimately woven into her sense of identity and

¹¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little Brown and Company), 2009, pp. 18-19.

reflect her steadfast devotion to God and her community. The Law keeps her alive to herself. It is like the mirror in James, that holds her true reflection so that she does not forget what she looks like. Her message to her grandson is a profoundly humanizing one in a historical time of deep de-humanization. It was after reading this book that I started to say “don’t forget who you are!” to my son before he’d head to school every day.

Food is a part of our identity. It reminds us of who we are and who we want to be. The food we eat can connect us to our family traditions and history: some of these for me would include memories of arguments about whether or not to put beets in the borscht, memories of my grandmother making vareniki for the Winkler co-op (cottage cheese perogies), and memories of being resentfully obliged to eat her cold fruit soup called pluma moos.

Sometimes we choose to stop eating certain foods – like Jonathan Safran Foer’s decision to stop eating meat, and sometimes we travel, or meet new friends from other cultures, and eat new foods that confuse us and delight us. I didn’t eat sushi or real curry until I was in my late teens and realized I had been really missing out! And now these foods are a part of my children’s lives and memories growing up in Toronto.

Sometimes we are judgmental about other people’s relationship to food or we feel guilt about our own eating habits. Anyone on social media is hounded by food advice and criticism. I certainly believe in food justice, sustainability and healthy consumption, but it’s sometimes hard to separate money-making schemes feeding on shame from true food justice.

I read an article in *Vice* magazine a number of years ago in which the Inuit throat singer and poet/writer Tanya Tagaq is interviewed. She expresses anger at the way certain global food activists have called out seal hunters, including her own Inuit people who rely on seal meat for survival.

Tagaq tells the interviewer:

In the 1970s, when Greenpeace started protesting the seal hunt, suicide rates jumped in Nunavut. To empower people, they have to feel good about themselves and be able to provide for their own families. If you’re making money by doing something you love and always did and are very good at, and are simultaneously feeding your children, that will help alleviate some of the socioeconomic problems, which will dovetail into having a higher quality of life.

As if in prayer, Tagaq goes on to describe the intentionality of hunting and eating meat:

When you’re hunting, you don’t want to chase an animal for a long time because the adrenaline will taint the meat, and you’ll be able to taste that. When animals are being slaughtered at

factory farms, they know what's happening. They can feel it in the air, and they've spent their whole lives being tortured in little quarters. You're eating their torture and anxiety, which inevitably isn't good for you.

There are a lot of people still eating off the land up north, and it's really beautiful because you're respecting the Earth and not polluting it. We should be being heralded as one of the last cultures that are living in harmony with the Earth, instead of being vilified... You look at what's happening on the planet right now and there's [a] disconnect from nature.²

People's relationship with food is political. It's challenging. It can be unhealthy. It can be unjust. It can be about survival. Our food and how we consume it can also connect us with its source. It is a path to the divine and a way to commune with creation, our ancestors and newcomers at our expanding tables.

How intentional are we about all of these elements when we eat? Do we fully digest our food or do we simply rush through the act of eating thoughtlessly? As we take a bite, do we already anticipate the next bite or become distracted by all of the things we have to do when our food is done? Do we approach all of our meals with the reverence of the Lord's supper?

One final perspective on food and intentionality that I'll leave you with comes from Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who meditates on the true nature of eating a tangerine and drinking tea. Let us consider this to be a closing prayer. He writes:

I am peeling the tangerine mindfully, and I enjoy every second, every moment. And this is life; this is true life. I will take one section. I look at it, always mindfully, and notice that it is something wonderful, real, before I put it in my mouth. And I notice the savour, the taste, the juice that is coming out, mindfully. So, I savour every second, every moment, of the time I take in order to enjoy the tangerine. And that is a spiritual experience... So, when you have your breakfast in mindfulness and concentration, your breakfast not only nourishes you, your body, but it nourishes your mind, your spirit. And when you drink your tea, that is also a spiritual practice, because from the time you pick up the tea and hold it in your hand to the time when you've finished the tea, it is a meditation, it is a spiritual practice, and you are alive all the way through, drinking your tea. And happiness, and peace, and joy, and the Kingdom of God is available during [this] whole time of... eating just a tangerine, or [just] your drinking your tea.³ Amen.

² <https://www.vice.com/en/article/eating-seal-meat-is-a-vital-part-of-life-in-my-community/>

³ <https://plumvillage.org/library/clips/tangerine-meditation#hypertranscript=508.8,715.7>