



*What have we
done to the earth
and to ourselves?*

The Ethics of Ignorance

By Mary Minette
ELCA Director for Environmental Education and Advocacy

Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Isaiah 58:6-7

Last year, for Lent, I gave up chocolate (and it was HARD). I know that we're Lutheran and we don't necessarily do that, but by picking something to work on (like a chocolate habit), I find them time to think about the bigger implications of small things. Last year, it led me to thinking about not only why I eat chocolate, but also about where the chocolate comes from and all of the people who are helped and harmed by chocolate (or cocoa) as it's grown and harvested, shipped and manufactured. Lent is a time to think about our relationship with God and God's earth and each other, and about how and where those relationships are broken. And sin and brokenness are pretty much everywhere—even in a piece of chocolate.

Or in a head of lettuce.

In a recent trip to Yuma, Arizona, which is where most of the lettuce sold in U.S. grocery stores is grown in the wintertime, I discovered that the romaine lettuce that I buy nearly every week during the winter has some hidden costs. I found myself rethinking my choices, and

wondering again about underlying sin and brokenness in otherwise ordinary things.

I buy packaged romaine hearts because they're convenient, generally the only organic choice at my local store, have more nutrients than iceberg lettuce, and because I like salad. I always thought I was making a pretty good choice.

But in a visit to a lettuce field in the Yuma area, I saw teams of farmworkers packing romaine lettuce hearts into plastic bags—essentially the same bags of lettuce that are sold in my local store. The remarkable thing was not how skilled the workers were as they cut and packed the lettuce, in an operation that resembled an open air factory assembly line, or how quickly the boxes of bagged lettuce piled up on the truck bed behind them. It wasn't the fact that the entire operation was taking place in the lettuce fields, rather than on the floor of a packing plant, as I had always assumed.

The remarkable thing about what I saw in that lettuce field was the sheer, crazy waste of the entire operation. In order to get the romaine hearts that the market demands, the outer leaves of the head of romaine are discarded right there in the field—it resembles a giant bowl of salad, slightly trampled, after the crew has passed through. Massive piles of perfectly good lettuce are left to rot, merely because consumers (like me) want their lettuce to look a certain way. Granted, when I asked I was told that the leaves are plowed under to nourish the next crop planted in the field, but the sheer scale of the waste seems wrong in a world where so many people are hungry. I was also told that the local food bank was forced to cancel its gleaning program because food safety concerns led farm owners to worry about their liability.

Earlier that same morning, I went with colleagues to the U.S./Mexico border south of Yuma, where many of the farmworkers I saw later that morning in the fields cross each morning from their homes to board buses that will take them out to the fields to begin their work. Their work begins very early in the morning, and because of a lack of personnel at the border crossing, many are forced to start getting in line to cross as early as 1 or 2 in the morning. When we arrived at a gas station about two blocks from the border at about 5 a.m. it was bustling, crowded with dozens of buses and hundreds of people. Many of the workers, following this early start to their day, will work a long day in the fields and then wait another hour or two to cross back over to their homes in Mexico. They would have a long, hard day of work even without the inconvenience of waiting for hours to cross the border—an inconvenience they endure because they must.

Knowing what I know now, about the injustice and waste it represents, I don't think I will ever buy another package of romaine lettuce hearts at my local store. But how many other things do we use or eat or buy

without thinking “where did this come from?” or “who is hurt by my having this?” It’s easy, when we do know more, to blame farmers for wasted food and poor conditions for farmworkers. But farmers are growing what supermarkets tell them consumers want to buy. Supermarkets are in the business of making products easy and convenient because it’s what market research tells them consumers want. Like blind men confronting an elephant, how you view the problem depends upon which part you grab first and no part by itself will give you the entire picture.

During this season of Lent, where do you find sin in your own choices? What does love of our neighbor and care for God’s creation require of us as consumers?

Learn More

Are you looking for a care of creation-themed resource to use during Lent this year?

The Ecumenical Water Network of the World Council of Churches offers seven weeks of reflection and action on [“The Economy of Water.”](#) Presbyterians for Earth Care have produced a devotional for Lent 2012, [“Feasting on God’s Gifts; Fasting in Sorrow.”](#)

Looking Ahead

The National Council of Churches resource for Earth Day 2012 is now available. [“A Life of Abundance: Ethics and Energy”](#) provides a Christian perspective on energy choices and God’s abundant gifts of energy.

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