The pandemic didn’t make our food system vulnerable

# It always has been—because vulnerability is part of creation.

by Nathan Stucky in the October 7, 2020 issue

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COVID-19 has messed with our food system.

Food service workers in all industries have been especially at risk, with high case counts in tiny counties notable for their meatpacking plants or farmworker communities. We’ve also seen the vulnerability in grocery store clerks and restaurant workers.

As consumers, we are usually shielded from vulnerability related to food. Our industrial food system conditions the consumer to expect the availability of all things at all times, regardless of geography or season. We can go to the store and find whatever we want whenever we want it.

By most accounts, 30 to 40 percent of all food produced in the US never makes it to anyone’s table. This does not happen because the system is failing. It happens

because the system is doing exactly what it is designed to do. That surplus of food functions as a part of the shield between consumer and vulnerability.

But vulnerability does not go away; it is simply outsourced. Our farmers depend on soil, sun, and water. Our meatpackers and farmworkers depend on market conditions and immigration policies they cannot control. They depend on people further along the food production chain, and frequently the food chain consumes them.

When they suffer, the system makes it almost impossible for the consumer to know or care.

In Genesis 1 (NRSV), food is the last word spoken by God. The six days of creation slowly crescendo to the moment when humans are finally on the scene, created in God's image and commissioned with good work to do.

"Be fruitful and multiply," God says. "Fill the earth and subdue it." And then: "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food."

It seems the first humans are ready to get to work. But that's not how the story goes. Rather, humankind's first full day of existence is a day of rest, and the first act of God that the first humans witness is God's rest.

What does this have to do with our contemporary food system?

First, the food given by God to humans and to countless other creatures is grace. It is a gift.

Second, food points to the vulnerability baked into creaturely identity. God creates a world with creatures that need to eat. Creatures need other creatures for life and sustenance. And this whole, wildly diverse, interdependent creation is deemed not just good, but "very good." Vulnerability, as part of creation, is good.

Then God does something that our contemporary food system never does. God stops. God rests.

Following Karl Barth, we see that in rest God reveals both freedom and love. Had God continued creating and creating, God would be held captive by the act of creating. The willingness to set limits demonstrates freedom. As Baptist pastor

Howard-John Wesley poignantly puts it, “If you can’t rest from it, you are ultimately a slave to it.”

We can also see something of God’s vulnerability on the seventh day. God creates in freedom and lavish love, but how will creation respond?

God’s stopping and resting could scarcely contrast with our contemporary food system any more completely. The food system works overtime to produce the illusion of limitless availability and invulnerability. It never stops, which is part of why the pandemic has disoriented us as much as it has. Our economy prioritizes ceaseless production, regardless of the toll on people, animals, or ecosystems.

Scripture’s broad witness to the sabbath anticipates this. Sabbatical and Jubilee years insist on rest for the whole creation. The scope of the sabbath commandment is similarly broad. Everyone gets sabbath, particularly the most vulnerable: children, slaves, resident aliens, and even livestock.

The commandment to honor the sabbath sits right at the center of the law, at the hinge point between the commands directed toward God and those directed toward neighbor. This commandment points God’s people simultaneously to God and neighbor.

People remember the sabbath because God did it first at creation—and also because there was a time when sabbath wasn’t an option for them. Remember Egypt, and refuse to replicate it. Remember that there was a time when your worth was reduced to your productivity. Remember the crushing oppression of a society and economy that refuses to stop. Remember when you disproportionately bore the vulnerability of a society.

Refuse to become that. Stop. Rest. Let sabbath point you simultaneously to God and neighbor.

Fast-forward a few centuries to a story Luke tells about love and neighbors. These days I cannot help but read the parable of the good Samaritan as a tale of soul-piercing vulnerability.

A man, nameless as the vulnerable usually are, is going from Jerusalem to Jericho when he is attacked by robbers and left for dead. Priest and Levite see the anonymous victim and quickly pass by, presumably preserving their invulnerability.

But when the Samaritan stops and helps the man, we see the contours of love that fulfills God's law and opens creation to eternal life—love that is willing to be moved, to be affected, to become vulnerable.

We've seen headlines announcing the apparent end of the crisis in meatpacking. Plants report a recovery in their production rates; prices at the supermarket have started to come back down. The suggestion of a return to normal brings with it the temptation of the priest and Levite: just keep going. Don't stop. Don't be affected.

But we must be affected. We must be willing to break through the shield that separates us from vulnerability. The path of love is the path of vulnerability.

The path of love is also a sabbath path—because it stops. It remembers dependence and interdependence. In the context of a society and economy addicted to perpetual motion, limitless production, and ceaseless consumption, it does not shirk from shared vulnerability. It welcomes rest for all as inseparable from justice for all.

What do we do?

I suggest stepping willingly into vulnerability for love's sake. Actively resist exploitation. Plant a garden. Buy a share in a community supported agriculture program. Support initiatives like the Good Food Purchasing Program in your community.

But also stop. Rest. Pay attention. Resist the momentum of limitless consumption. If you live near a community of farmworkers, farmers, meatpackers, or others embedded deep in the food system, dare to get to know their stories. Dig deep into the stories of your food and get to know the people, plants, and animals on whom your life depends. Enter their vulnerability.

The parable of the good Samaritan ends with the Samaritan's promise to return and pay the innkeeper for any expenses involved in the anonymous man's care. It's easy for me to imagine the Samaritan's return, complete with a banquet for the Samaritan, for the one who fell victim to the robbers, for the innkeeper, and countless vulnerable others.

It's more difficult to imagine a place at the table for the priest and the Levite. But I'd like to think there's a place at the table for me and for all those conditioned to avoid vulnerability.

At that table, vulnerability is shared by all for love’s sake. Labels and categories fade: Samaritan, victim, robber, priest, Levite, consumer, farmworker, meatpacker, grocer.

At Christ’s table, we begin to see each other for who we truly are: neighbors.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Denying our vulnerability.”*