Ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan on food justice and Jesus

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Amy Frykholm interviews Gary Nabhan in the April 7, 2021 issue

(Photo by Dennis Moroney)

Ethnobotanist and ecumenical Franciscan brother Gary Nabhan has written more than 30 books about food, ecology, botany, and justice. His most recent book, Jesus for Farmers and Fishers*, focuses on religious and biblical aspects of food justice.*

Why, after more than 30 books on such a wide range of topics, did you decide to write a book about Jesus?

To start with, Jesus has been along with me on all of these adventures. Also, I wanted to call attention to the way that people of many faiths have been the safety net in the form of food banks and soup kitchens and other food relief. They tend to

get overlooked by activists and even academics who are interested in food justice and food security. I think that's a shame, because faith-based groups have done the lion's share of that work for well over a century in the United States and Europe.

You focus a great deal in this book on Jesus' parables? Why?

I love the symbolism of bread. I've grown bread wheat as a farmer. I've gone around the world conserving different grains used for bread. Our staple foods remind us of our elemental relationship to the earth. Our bread is the staff of life, and for many of us, our faith is the staff of life.

In the parables of Jesus that double entendre is going on all the time. Jesus was preaching to people who were in the middle of the worst farming and fishing crisis in history up until that moment. The Roman Empire was abducting most of the nourishing foods being produced in Galilee. He couldn't speak out every day about this crisis, so he buried his messages in these stories. But then the stories always work on multiple levels, and that's why we have so many beautiful interpretations of the parables.

My own heritage is from farms in Lebanon, about 50 miles north of the Israeli border, where members of my family still farm today. I grew up with stories from my grandfather and uncles about farming there, and then I went back as an adult and worked with farmers all over that region. That wonderful opportunity to walk in their shoes is what triggered me to look at the parables from that perspective.

How does understanding the food culture of the first century help us understand Jesus?

Jesus became incarnate in this world because God so loved this world—and not just humans but also the fruits and seeds and fish and fowl that are part of creation. Jesus could have stayed remote from all of that, I suppose, but he came among us to share in it viscerally. The most remarkable thing about the story of incarnation for me is that God loved the world enough to share the same pleasures and pains that we have. That the incarnation happened during this farming and fishing crisis meant that he couldn't ignore that.

Could you walk us through one parable—maybe the parable of the sower—and show us how your engagement with food culture and Jesus' own relationship to the land provides insight?

The parable of the sower is probably the most written about by biblical scholars and poets of all of Jesus' parables. My work is of course built on all of that work, but it also adds an ecological or agroecological point of view.

First we notice that the sower was not sowing a uniform seed. She was sowing a mixture of seeds: some of which were suited to barren, low-fertility soils; some that did best in the rockier soils; some of which could outcompete weeds; and some of which grew where the land was a little bit salty. There are many places in the Middle East where this saltiness of the soil and this variation of the landscape still exist.

As an agricultural scientist, I thought about Jesus' choices in this parable. Jesus could have made the seed uniform, or he could have made the place where it was sown uniform. But this is really a story about his acceptance of the world's heterogeneity.

Each of us finds our niche where we can live to the most benefit, and there are perils of mismatches. The ones that meet the challenges of their environment produce twentyfold or fiftyfold or a hundredfold or five hundredfold. It is a remarkable sentient perspective on agriculture, as well as on the human soul. Agroecologists are returning to recommending that farmers grow mixtures of seeds, because of climate uncertainty and other challenges farmers face today. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for our agricultural problems. This is a story about the fitting between seed and soil—and maybe each of us is a seed with a place, an environment, where we are most fertile and productive.

In many of your books, you express a lot of optimism for the way US food systems are shifting. What are the sources of that optimism?

I grew up in the 1950s in the Midwest in a place where it was very hard to get diverse food. We grew up on Wonder Bread and peanut butter and cold cut meats full of chemicals that I don't even want to think about. But there were also farm families around us who were putting up their harvests, because that's what the Dust Bowl had reinforced in them. You were obligated as a Christian to hold some food back for hard times—not only so that you could use it but so that you could have something for your neighbors. That kind of midwestern Protestant ethic was all around.

At the same time, I was from this Lebanese-Syrian immigrant family. My grandfather was a fruit peddler, and he loved the diversity of fruits that he could pull out of his hat, so to speak. He'd go 250 miles from our hometown, getting different kinds of

plums, peaches, and figs, varieties that he was familiar with, in some cases, from growing up on the Lebanese-Syrian border. I became a connoisseur of fruit from a young age. As a little tyke, I pretended to be his business partner.

I am optimistic because so much has changed. For one thing, there is our acceptance of food from other ethnicities and other traditions. Now we want those things in our grocery stores every day. I have friends, and you probably do too, who might make Szechuan food one night, Mexican the next, Indian or Pakistani food the next. We have learned to accept the diversity of the many peoples around us by falling in love with their foods. If that can support entry into us being more tolerant and grateful for the incredible diversity in the United States, so be it. Refugee farmers have enriched our lives and our taste buds in important ways, and they are playing an increasingly important role in US agriculture.

You have launched a new project in relationship with Indigenous communities that live along the US-Mexico border. Tell us more about this project and how it might shape our understanding of the US-Mexico border.

Border communities of Indigenous people have taught me so much about the desert where I live. This project is being done with seven Indigenous communities that have ancestral and traditional lands on both sides of the border. Their approach to seeing their ancestral and sacred lands cut in half by the border wall, for example, has been what they call sacred activism or healing activism. They bring together a larger group of intertribal and interfaith organizations to communicate to the US and Mexican governments how important their traditional lands and practices are to their whole way of being.

My wife and I are two of the three facilitators who found support from the Kalliopeia Foundation to document the concerns these communities have about their religious freedoms being curtailed, their pilgrimage routes across the border being disrupted, sacred plants being cleared for border wall construction. Then we filed complaints with the government on the basis of that documentation, and some investigations have been launched.

More importantly, this project brings people together for ceremonies, people from across these communities who have been experiencing significant stress from seeing their lands and communities divided by the wall. One was a youth ceremony

where Indigenous runners each ran 35 miles from springs located on their traditional lands to meet at the border, where they exchanged spring waters to replenish the waters that have been depleted from groundwater pumping for cement mixing to build the wall.

Tell us about your other name: Brother Coyote. Where did this name come from?

Coyotes are the iconic trickster figures who wake us up to the absurdities of the world. In many of the stories about them, coyotes make moral or ethical mistakes that everyone else can learn from. Most of the mistakes that coyotes make are terribly funny, and humor is another bridge among cultures. When I've been playing around or goofing around with people from these border communities, they've sometimes compared me to the coyote. So when the Franciscan order told me I had to take a new name to become a full member of the order, I thought of St. Francis, who called the wolf Brother Wolf. I thought maybe here in the New World, I could help bring peace through the image of the coyote.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Food in the desert."