

## Dominion

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From Genesis 1:24 “Let the earth produce every kind of living creature in its own species: cattle, creeping things and wild animals of all kinds And so it was. And God saw that it was good. And God said let us make human beings in our own image, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the skies, and cattle and all the wild animals and all creatures that crawl along the ground. And God created them, male and female. And God blessed them saying to them: ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’”

We are going to start today, with two tales of chickens. Several years ago I had a week of work in Puerto Rico. I stayed in a beach hotel and took a cab daily to the Eli Lilly Plant in Carolina. In the evenings, I’d range out to find some vegetarian fare among the tourist eateries.

One day I was eating my salad and I noticed that directly across the street – there was a round building with a clean, well lighted parking lot. I was thinking about this talk back then and after eating I walked over and paid my \$20 to enter a cock-fighting arena. The air conditioned room was half-full on a weeknight with mostly middle-aged men – almost all smoking cigars and drinking simple rum concoctions or beer. I bought a beer and waited.

Around ten there were two bouts of significance. The rival trainers fussed over their champions. These are the Mike Tysons of the chicken world – compact, loaded with muscle, deadly. The roosters are fitted with a plastic barb taped to their ankles. In the final two bouts many bets are placed, often for hundreds of dollars.

In a few noisy minutes of shouting and flying blood and feathers, it is over. One cock is dead, the other the victor. I’m not sure I can say I enjoyed this “entertainment”, though there was less blood displayed than in your average Hollywood action film. But it raised some questions for me.

The thing that tipped my decision to enter the arena – like a thunderbolt hurled from the God of Irony – was a road-sign just outside the building for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

In Arkansas or East Texas there are some other chickens. They might be associated with a different Tyson. These chickens are raised in large, dim warehouse style buildings and they live their entire lives in a box. There are many cages stacked on top of each other and the feces from the chickens above fall on those below causing painful ammonia burns to the birds' skin, eyes, and lungs. The box is not large enough to move around in and the only thing to do is eat. These chickens are the descendents of other chickens of this type and for some their limbs have atrophied such that they could not walk if they had the opportunity. Male chicks are usually gassed or minced alive.

There is no walking around in the yard pecking at things for these chickens, no Foghorn Leghorn chicken romantic intrigues – most will never see the sunshine. When they are large enough the truck that regularly drives by stops for them. They are yanked into the truck and taken to a machine. In a few seconds of flying blood and feathers it is over. A chicken is dead and an order of McNuggets or Buffalo wings is the victor.

Cock fighting, though Thomas Jefferson and Wilfred Brimley have been fans, is illegal in the continental U.S. (only recently in Louisiana) because the sensibilities of liberal Americans objected to the idea of entertainment with a fight to the death.

But I can't help but wonder why these same people do not object to the horrendous treatment of these other chickens. In fact, many support this practice by buying their meat. What if we asked the chickens? What fate would they prefer? To be a featured performer and die fighting? Or be put on a painful shelf and treated like a piece of inventory? They die at our whim either way.

Early in 2007, Rapper Sean "Diddy" Combs apologized for sponsoring the sale of "raccoon" coats made from dog fur. Rapper Jay-Z has offered a similar garment on sale. The Humane Society reported that they purchased and genetically tested coats from Nordstroms and Tommy Hilfiger that were made from dog fur and mislabeled.

The public outcry associated with the discovery of the use of domesticated dogs for fur or meat, similarly sets me wondering. As much as I love dogs, it is mysterious to me that we are so shocked to find dogs treated as

“livestock” and not “pets”, when we will ignore the horrific mistreatment of pigs.

The pig is a creature that is every bit as intelligent and social, even loving as a dog. Pigs are the closest genetic match to human beings among all non-primates and are used in research for this purpose. But even though we have every reason to treat pigs with more compassion than the lowly chicken – these animals suffer similar treatment and worse.

In the United States over 80 million pigs are born and die in small metal cages in indoor factory farms. The pigs are kept in separate crates, mother pigs are tied down on their sides so that piglets in the next crate can feed. In spite of their reputation, pigs are normally clean creatures who live up to fifteen years. Factory farmed pigs live their entire life (of about seven months) in a cramped indoor cage sodden with their own feces.

Unlike chickens, these sensitive and intelligent creatures complain and resist – and they punished for it with cattle prods and beatings. Unlike the more valuable cow, veterinary care, even veterinary supervision is almost unheard of. A sick pig isn't worth saving and is just killed outright.

When it is time for their slaughter, the pigs are packed into semi-trucks so crowded they are standing on top of each other. At the slaughter house they are stunned, their throats cut and then dumped into boiling water. Have you ever been to a rodeo? Remember how hard it is to catch those wily pigs? Although tests reveal it can take four or five shocks to stun a pig into unconsciousness, they are processing 1100 pigs per hour in many of these factories and so many bleeding pigs die aware that they are being drowned in boiling water by the weight of their kin dumped in on top of them.

You may ask “aren't you just exaggerating by offering the most objectionable examples? I have family and friends that own cattle, they aren't treated so poorly.”

Although many cows graze by the side of the road, over half of the beef cows in the United States are raised in an indoor cage.

When they are slaughtered, the standard practice is to stun the cow to unconsciousness with electrical shock, hang it by its hind leg and then cut its throat so that it dies of blood loss. However, the shock often doesn't work and though the procedure then calls for shooting the cow in the brain,

when a slaughterhouse is processing 300 cows per hour, more than rarely conscious cattle are bled and carved fully aware and hanging upside down by a broken leg. They can't complain vocally – their throats are cut first.

Any of these factory farming or slaughterhouse scenarios – if your imagination can put a human or even a beagle in the principal role – would stretch the R rating in a horror film, and yet they happen all day everyday in these industries.

UUs appreciate reason, let's reason this. If we can use the national averages, the city of Austin which has about one million folks, requires a population of a quarter million cows, a half million chickens, 200,000 pigs, and just less than a 100,000 turkeys to support it's diet. That's just about one creature per person. If these creatures are all raised outdoors on family farms, where are these one million creatures? Do you see them? Do you wonder where they are?

In 1967 there were a million pig farms in America, as of 2002 there were 114,000 much larger ones, most of them factory farms. Globally, three quarters of the world's chickens and almost half of the world's beef cows are raised in indoor warehouses. In the U.S. the numbers are higher.

I invite you, nay challenge you to follow up and research this and if you are as dismayed as I am about this - there is something you can do to help these suffering animals.... Stop eating them.

As an industry, slaughterhouses have very poor employee safety records. And slaughtering is a messy business: they use virulent cleansers to clean up the blood, fluids and feces, and these chemicals often wind up in our water. Many of the worst water polluters in America are slaughterhouses. Check the record for the slaughterhouse business and you'll find that it's not only animals that are treated with disregard.

The intense proximity of the animals, and large amounts of waste and blood present in a factory farm also increases the risk that pathogens can be spread among them and get into the food supply. And the intense interbreeding undermines their genetic diversity and compromises the creatures' immune systems, requiring even more antibiotics – which cause the viral strains to become more resistant.

To produce one pound of feedlot beef requires about 2,400 gallons of water and a 70 lbs. of grain and Americans consume over 200 lbs of meat per year. According to the USDA, growing crops for meat-producing

animals requires nearly half of the U.S. water supply and 80% of our agricultural land.

That same USDA study sites that the most efficient food production from animals consumes four times more energy – mostly coal and petroleum - than the same protein and nutrition from a vegetable source. The least efficient is more like forty times.

But to meet demand – and the meat eating that having an “American” lifestyle generates in newly industrialized nations – our land, water, and energy aren’t enough. To satisfy that appetite, South American rainforest is cleared for cattle-raising every day. And these large old growth forests are the most efficient Carbon Dioxide and greenhouse gas scrubbers we have. According to the United Nations, "(r)anching-induced deforestation is one of the main causes of loss of some unique plant and animal species in the tropical rainforests of Central and South America as well as carbon release in the atmosphere."

The energy required to feed, transport, and slaughter livestock, along with the destruction of our precious air-cleaning forest resource make meat one of the primary causes of planetary atmospheric damage.

A recent United Nations report titled “Livestock's Long Shadow” concluded that the meat industry causes more greenhouse gas emission damage than all the world's transportation systems--that's all the cars, trucks, SUVs, planes and ships in the world combined. The report also concluded that factory farming is one of the biggest contributors to the most serious environmental problems at every level--local and global.

A University of Chicago study of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions determined that an American would reduce CO<sub>2</sub> more by switching to a vegetarian diet, than by switching to a hybrid car like a Prius.

Are you concerned about hunger and starvation? Peter Singer, a Harvard ethicist writes, "The world is not running out of food. The problem is that we--the relatively affluent--have found a way to consume four or five times as much food as would be possible, if we were to eat the crops we grow directly.

You may ask: “Are you saying we must be vegetarians? Is all meat eating wrong? I come from a long line of Texas carnivores – it is my heritage!”

I became a vegetarian over ten years ago, in part because of my friend and long-time vegetarian Steve Hodgkins. During the time I knew Steve, he became an avid archer and then bow-hunter. Though he remained almost entirely vegetarian – he ate the venison from his own hunt.

One hundred and fifty years ago most Americans lived on family farms. On these farms, the family cared for the animals, feeding them, looking out for them. In a way, the animals reciprocated by providing meat. The slaughter – a recognition of life and death was done by the family itself. In Northern climates, fruits and vegetables could not be grown or stored for the long cold months.

But the cows in the barns – less picky about their diets would eat the stored grain and they provided much needed nutrition through those long months.

Prominent in our Texas heritage are cowboys. Sure these guys ate meat – plenty of it - but they spent their lives caring for cows. One of the most heroic Western images is the cowboy – not in a shootout – but bringing in the herd or finding the lost stray in bad weather or drought. In rodeos – and I've been to a few rodeos - cowboys who injure the stock are immediately disqualified. We can't ethically claim this legacy by eating the meat but not claiming the responsibility that real cowboys had for the animals. Times change – there are very few real cowboys in Texas today.

Today a statistically insignificant number of Americans have anything like that 19th century symbiotic relationship with meat-providing animals, or the ethical discipline of my friend Steve. The negligent care and horrific slaughter is performed far away off some main road and we find our meat wrapped in plastic at the grocery store or in styrofoam at the fast food place. But as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote all the way back in 1860

“You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.”

It is simply exploitation.

Today that same global shipping, freezing and refrigeration that provide distance for the meat-eater makes a vegetarian diet viable for anyone.

Futurists are increasingly seeing the growing ranks of vegetarians as one of the signs of hope that we can control atmospheric decay and bio-diversity collapse.

Smartest guy of all time Albert Einstein wrote “Nothing will benefit health or increase chances of survival on earth as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.”

You may be thinking: “This is an over-reaction, the slaughterhouses are cruel and messed up and land clearing is a problem, but those things can be appropriately fixed with political action, with legislation.”

Actually, no – what I’m talking about today is conscience, personal ethics and I don’t think factory farming of animals can ever really be ethical, and it is unnecessary. Sustaining anything resembling an ethical meat-based diet for all humans would require even more land, resources, and money. You may decide to eat only free-range chickens and organic beef and that will reduce your guilt on the treatment of those animals if you can afford it, but it is unworkable on the large scale.

We have entered into a new era in our relationship with animals. Long ago we were vegetarians and we were prey, then we entered an era as hunters and gatherers where some became prey for us, others allies. Then we entered an era as shepherds and farmers with domesticated animals for meat balanced with vegetable crops on our small farms.

But that has changed and now we live in an era of dominion – where we must take responsibility or the result is annihilation for many species. An era where there are many, many humans to feed. An era where you can never take responsibility for exploitation that you can’t or won’t see.

What I’m talking about doesn’t take legislation or a political movement, all it takes is a decision and some discipline and it can start today.

A decision that doesn’t cost money – it’s actually cheaper.

A decision that can significantly reduce your chance of getting food borne pathogens, heart disease, arthritis, and cancer

A decision that could not only be the single most valuable thing you can do to protect the planet, it may be inevitable for our species – the only way we survive.

A decision that can bring at least one person into that new era of responsibility, the ultimate expression of “think globally, act locally...”

Call it a movement if you like, there many more vegetarians than Unitarian Universalists and our numbers are growing daily. But you don't have to join or pay dues, you just have to do.

Let's be clear... I'm asking you to consider being a vegetarian because you are sitting in a room of people who have consciously chosen their religion – often choosing this lifestyle element over one in your cultural tradition. I'm begging that if you love your dog, to give up eating pork and bacon which exercise such cruelty on such a similar soul. I'm asking you to consider choosing aspects of your diet – paying attention to what you eat - in away that can improve your physical, financial, and spiritual health, and improve the prospects of life on this planet.

If you are what you eat. Do you want a big heaping helping of planetary destruction, heart disease, and cruelty?

Eons ago the animal that would become the human being climbed down out of its fruit tree. We set about inventing language, technology, opera, football, and Unitarian Universalism. Along the way we became omnivores and came to dominant the planet, traveling to every corner of the globe, effecting every acre and creature with our appetite for living. Who'd have thought we'd hear that "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" and actually do it.

We have come to assume God-like dominion over the animal kingdom. Our pets and livestock are completely dependent on us and we determine when and how they will eat and reproduce. Even wild animals are dependent on us. The emissions from our cars drive the mighty polar bear from the ice pack. For all wild animals, we determine how much territory they have, whether their prey and predators live or die, whether the air they breathe and water they drink is clean or dirty. Today, every animal species on the planet would be forced to recognize this dominion if they could.

For animals we are powerful Gods – no less powerful than any we consider or remember. Gods with the power to decide whether they live or die. With the power to decide when and with whom they reproduce. To decide if they have any opportunity for life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness.

Here on Sundays, in our free religion, we sometimes talk about God as if we could choose our own. We sing and talk about a God who is

compassionate and wise, beneficent and caring. What kind of God would you like?

The question I have today for you is more practical – you can begin answering within the hour. That question is: What kind of God will you be?