

Embracing our bodies

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

March 17, 2016

Each year, I fast for Lent. The process is always transformative. After doing something for forty days, it becomes easier to maintain the discipline after Easter. The habit becomes a part of me, and my cravings shift. And so, over the years, I stopped consuming fried things, sugary drinks, and meat. I've learned to appreciate my wheat whole instead of bleached. In case these seem like ridiculous diet fads, for me, they aren't. The choices mean living a different life. Of course, I don't do all of these things all of the time. It would be impossible. But my body now *wants* to do these things all the time.

I no longer go out at some ungodly hour to yell, "Hamburger, please!" at a neon-lit plastic sign because I worked twelve hours and hadn't even thought about lunch. I can no longer delude myself into thinking that tomato juice and those tiny peanuts consumed on an airplane is an actual meal. Also, those foil-wrapped bars that taste like sawdust and honey? Those aren't meals either. I have to inconvenience my hosts when I travel. When I'm home, I have to eat out less and keep the kitchen stocked with fresh things. I have to go to the grocery store more (something I hate doing) and plant vegetable gardens.

All of this took years, but eventually, it meant appreciating the taste of whole food. I could smell my food before it was cooked, I could monitor the color bursting at that moment it went from raw to ready. I could reclaim the goodness of the earth.

The changes also meant gaining weight. As a vegetarian, I have to eat meals now, instead of going around wondering why I'm so light-headed. I have to listen to my body—which, come to find out, has a lot to tell me about my workload, travel schedule, and stress. But I think I'm okay with that.

I know there's nothing more annoying than people who've changed diets. We think that everyone needs to be like us, and we get all high and mighty about it. I get it. Growing up in the U.S. of A., where we love our fried food, corn syrup, *and* starved

women, I'm uncomfortable around the topic of food. When I fast, I refuse to go completely without food. I guess I just can't follow Jesus all the way into that wilderness. I just have to skirt the barren edge of that desert.

I started dieting when I was nine. I grew up on a beach in Florida, where women wear bikinis tops in the same way most people wear t-shirts. I had a mom and an older sister who dieted constantly, so I learned how to starve and purge from an early age. I'll never forget how, on my sixteenth birthday, I ate a piece of cake, so I snuck out of my own party. I put on workout clothes, and escaped outside. It was 70 degrees and I could hear the distant sounds of waves crashing. Then I ran as long and as fast as I possibly could in order to burn the calories and the guilt. I'm sad for that girl, who couldn't just celebrate without some form of flagellation.

I'm in middle age now. I walk around without people noticing. One friend described it as having an invisibility cloak, and there's a wonderful freedom in it. I let go of that body anxiety and I got ready to move into full, crone status. But I have my own teen daughter now, which forces me once again to disentangle healthy diets from eating disorders and the male gaze. Women consume so many messages along with our food. And Kim Kardashian posting naked selfies doesn't help. (Is she another woman, sacrificing her body to patriarchy and teaching our daughters to do the same? Or is she an empowered, fully sexualized being? If so, then why doesn't Kanye have to get all naked on Twitter to prove he's an empowered sexualized being? And why do we have to care about Kim Kardashian again?)

Anyways, I have this whole twisted mess of pleasure and guilt that comes from food, and I didn't think that adding a suffering Jesus onto that tangle would exactly help.

Except that it has helped. I have been able to re-frame food into a spiritual practice, which has allowed me to question all sorts of things about the environment and the suffering of animals. It has opened up new avenues of pleasure. As I have become healthier, I think I have a healthier relationship with this flesh and blood. I think about the relationship between black bodies and our faith—and why it's important to keep protesting and yelling that they *matter*.

So the suffering of Jesus has not led me to suffer in my food choices. Oddly enough, it's done the opposite. It's helped me to appreciate food and bodies--my own as well as others. I suppose it's helped me to move into a more incarnational faith.