

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51 [RCL]
by the Rev. Machrina L. Blasdell

Café Beaujolais is a wonderful bakery in Mendocino, on the northern California coast. Every day they bake a rich, dense bread they call Austrian Sunflower Bread, boasting different seeds and grains and yielding a golden loaf of complex texture and rich flavor. This is how it's described in their materials: "Austrian Sunflower Bread, our healthiest loaf, is hearty and moist, keeps well despite a lack of any oil or butter. Made with white flour, sunflower seeds, cracked wheat, oats, barley, polenta, millet, buckwheat, flax seed, soy grits, sesame seeds, water, malt, sea salt, and yeast."

This is the sort of bread invoked by Jesus' claim: "I am the bread of life." Certainly, the follow-on claim: "Those who come to me shall not hunger," has much texture to it when such a bread is considered.

What is your usual bread of choice? Even in the absence of a market survey, it's reasonable to imagine that the most popular and most often eaten bread in America is sliced white bread -- that stuff of many air holes, squishy texture, consistent predictable color, and a flavor so bland it is hard to describe.

We love it. It's the perfect platform for peanut butter and jelly, and toasted, makes a good bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. One of the reasons we like it is precisely because it contributes so little to our experience of food. Tasteless, it doesn't compete with other flavors. Of little texture, it is easy on the palate; we don't have to work much to eat it. Predictable in its shape and color and size, sliced white bread is portion-controlled. Lacking in its own nutrients, vitamins are added for our good health. Mass produced and prominent in our grocery stores, it is the best price we can

get. To top it all off, it has preservatives so that freshness is not so much a concern.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. Is Jesus akin to sliced white bread? What kind of bread comes to mind when we hear “I am the bread of life”? Perhaps some will think of pita bread, or brown bread, what we have come in contemporary times to associate with the Last Supper. Yet even that is not what we use in most churches for communion bread, probably because of “convenience,” which some of us have named “tradition.” In many Protestant churches that commemorate the Lord’s Supper, the bread of choice is the conventional white bread. I have had the honor of attending Lord’s Supper celebrations with my many Mormon friends and they use torn white bread and water as the elements. In other churches, such as the Anglican, Lutheran, and Catholic traditions, we often use communion wafers. Is this the “bread of life” to which Jesus likened himself? Many a seminary professor has observed that it is easier to imagine the communion wafer as Christ than to imagine the wafer as bread. The same has been said of our favorite American white bread.

Today’s Gospel reading begins with Jesus’ proclamation: “I am the bread of life.” Earlier we read the story that has come to be known as the feeding of the five thousand, wherein many hungry people are fed on very little bread. The focus of this feeding story has traditionally been the miracle of the free meal, with little attention given to the bread itself and what it might signify. In the same way that the focus of the mass feeding has been on the miracle and not the food itself, so, too, with today’s proclamation that Jesus is the “bread of life,” we usually focus our attention on Jesus rather than on the bread. But how can we begin to understand what he was saying about himself until we look more closely at the bread?

This passage from John's Gospel is a lesson about abundance. It is difficult to associate plain white bread, the mass-produced kind, with abundance. It makes a good carrier for other flavors, but by itself, doesn't have much "tooth." Consider a sampling of breads from smaller bakeries, and the sorts of breads that some of us make at home:

Banana nut bread

Chocolate cherry bread

Ten-grain bread

Rye with caraway

Cheddar cheese and jalapeno bread

Blue corn tortillas

Italian loaf

French baguette

Ricotta cheese and roasted garlic bread

Rosemary olive oil bread

Sourdough bread

Our lives -- our families and friends -- are enriched with fruits and nuts. Why not our bread? And to turn that around: When Jesus spoke of himself as bread, as the Bread of Life, is it possible that he was speaking of richness, of texture, of boldness and flavor? That he was inviting us to a greater feast in our life of faith?

Jesus' ministry was built on the rich foundation of many stories of feeding and being fed. We have one example in today's reading from the Old Testament. In the reading from 1 Kings, Elijah sets out on a long journey sustained by the gift of the angel of the Lord: food! Not just once does the angel feed him, but twice. The angel commands him: "Get up and eat!" This wasn't just any food, but bread. Elijah "got up and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God."

Jesus was well-acquainted with the Exodus story and would have known the tradition that the Lord God sustained the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years with manna -- bread -- from heaven. It is in the wilderness of the desert as in the wilderness of our souls that we hunger. The Exodus theme permeates John's Gospel, setting up a tension between the manna given from heaven to feed the people in the wilderness and the Eucharistic bread that feeds us in the wilderness of our souls. Somewhere in the midst of that tension we find the bread of life: not manna from God, not the flesh of Christ, but the Bread of Life, the Bread that brings life.

If this vision of bread given us in John's Gospel teaches us something about Jesus, perhaps the first lesson to keep in mind is that Jesus is not simple, not plain, not undemanding. Our Lord is many-textured, multifaceted, and complex in flavor. He calls us to love, to forgive, to encourage, and to get involved. He showed us how to welcome, to persist, and to stand firm. Our Lord was tender; he enjoyed meals with strangers and disciples, he rebuked the careless. Jesus taught in the temple, raised the dead to life, challenged the complacent to care, wept over the death of a friend, and told stories. He drank wine at a wedding. He washed filthy feet. He prayed.

When we hear Jesus proclaim, "I am the Bread of Life," let us hear all of these things and many more. And as we live our lives and live our faith, let us be rich in texture, of bold flavor, and nourishing to the world. No more white bread in our love of God, but abundant life, abundant living, abundant faith.

While searching for the ingredients of Austrian Sunflower Bread a Web site turned up this journal entry, contributed by an American living in Austria: "I'm partial to the sonnenblumenbrot, the sunflower seed bread, a dense whole-wheat loaf with a variety of whole grains mixed in. ... When you eat bread here in Austria,

you understand why it's so hard to find something that even comes close to good enough. Bread in Austria is Food, with a capital F. It's not some spongy filler or a vehicle for a spread; it's a Food with its own merits. ... [The American continues] the other day we were at the Merkur, a new chain supermarket that recently opened in Liezen. They have a bakery and they had just packed up a fresh batch of sonnenblumenbrot. When I picked it up, it was still warm. It held the warmth until we got it home and when I sliced the end off, sunflower seeds scattered across the bread board. I ate my fresh slice with a slab of butter. It was delicious and satisfying."

So, it is with our Lord, the Bread of Life. So, should it be with our life of faith: delicious, satisfying.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen

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