

Becoming Bread

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John 6:1-15 (also Matt 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17)

II Kings 4:42-44

Psalm 145:10-18

Zwiebach. Rye. Pita. Sourdough. Oatmeal. Pumpernickel. Tortilla. Naan. Cracked wheat. Bread. It ties us to people all over the world -- in the present and the past. In a majority of churches bread is the unifying factor each time Christians meet for worship, as they celebrate the Eucharist together each week. Here at Hyattsville Mennonite we generally break bread together in worship five times each year. During the next six weeks we will be sharing bread together each Sunday as we look at the "bread" chapter in John.

John 6 begins with the story we heard this morning: the feeding of the 5,000. It is a familiar story, so familiar one might wonder what more can be said. We tell this one to our children, in rhyming picture books, we act it out. A child is the one, the hero, a little child leads them. So is there anything left for adults in the story?

This story, like so many in the New Testament, seems to be a corollary to an account in the Hebrew Bible. The companion story this morning is from II Kings. These two events have common elements: a doubting follower, large hungry crowd and then full stomachs.

A man comes from the land of Baal-shalishah bringing food to the prophet Elisha. The man gives it to Elisha but instead of keeping the food for himself Elisha instructs his servant to give it to the people who are gathered. And while it must be lovely food, the first fruits -- barley loaves and grain -- it really is not enough for the hundred people gathered. Despite objections, Elisha persists in his instruction to share the barley bread with the people and he insists "there will be some left." Of course there is.

The feeding of the 5,000 is one of the stories that appear in each of the four gospels. In fact, in Mark and Matthew the story appears twice, albeit with different numbers of people and different amounts of bread gathered at the end. Each gospel writer has a point to make with this mysterious story and it is not always the same point -- so sometimes the details vary.

John draws our attention to the time of the event; it is nearly Passover. Tradition had it that the messiah would appear during the Passover. By setting the scene near the Passover season, John is giving us a hint about Jesus' identity as well as setting us up for understanding Jesus as the Passover bread later in John 6. John tells us that the 5 loaves that the young boy donates are

barley loaves, the same kind that the prophet Elisha received from the man from Baal-shalishah in the story from II Kings.

Barley was not the bread of royalty, it was the staple of the poor. While not known for its delicate flavor or light texture, it sure filled the belly. This bread of the poor was shared amongst the 5,000 gathered on that ample grassy area. Before the sharing takes place however there must come some order out of the chaos of the crowd. Jesus instructs his disciples, "Tell everyone to sit down." As is the case anytime Jesus shares bread with his friends and followers, he first thanks God, then breaks the bread and then shares it with those gathered.

After everyone has had their fill, Jesus tells the disciples to gather up what is leftover so that nothing is lost. While we who have more than enough food think this a strange instruction, to not lose any leftovers, it is not just food that John is talking about here. The 12 baskets leftover are the 12 tribes not to be lost, but to be brought back to The Way.

The crowd gathered understands Jesus feeding the people as a sign of his being a prophet. The earliest readers and listeners to the story would also have understood this sign of the leftover 12 baskets. Given the context of Passover, the 12 baskets of bread, the feeding of many from a little, is it any wonder that the crowd understands Jesus as Messiah, the one sent from God? John is telling us that Jesus understands it all too but knows that his role is not as an earthly king. As the crowd attempts to make Jesus a king, Jesus does as he often does, he seeks solitude from those that follow him.

This story hits us in the gut, literally. We all eat. Yet depending on where we live and how we eat we may ask different questions of the food when we come to the table. For those who have plenty of money and plenty of food, the main concern as a meal is served is often "How does the food look? Is it pleasing to the eye? How is the presentation?"

For those with less money and less time on their hands the question is more likely, "How does it taste? Is this mixture of flavors pleasing to the palate?"

And for those who eat simply for the calories, to keep the body going, the presentation and the taste are definitely an afterthought. The question that most concerns those who are persistently hungry is "Will there be enough?"

Think about how meals were placed on the table when you were a child. Think about what you say when you serve your own guests now? After all the obligatory Mennonite apologies for the mistakes and shortcuts made in preparation are you most concerned about quantity, taste or presentation? The answer to that question gives some indication of where we are in the social stratum.

We understand from the way John tells the story that presentation and taste were the least of the worries for the people that sat on the grass with Jesus that day. The main question was, will there be enough? Amazingly, there was. But that there was enough for those gathered, that those gathered ate their fill, is not the whole story. Jesus tells the disciples to gather all that is left. Will it be saved for those who were not fortunate enough to be there that day? Is Jesus saying that though you missed this hillside banquet there is “more back?” Jesus says, “Don’t let anything be lost.” Even the smallest crumbs are important in the reign of God; nothing goes to waste. All can be used and all are needed. While later in John God is pictured as the shepherd who searches for the one lost sheep, in this story not even a crumb shall be lost.

John begins with Jesus feeding the crowd bread and fish, with abundance of bread for everyone gathered. By the end of the chapter, Jesus is no longer just feeding people barley bread but is referring to *himself* as the bread of life.

One phrase has been most compelling to me the past weeks. It comes the hymn **What is this place:**

“We are each other’s bread and wine.”

It is not only Jesus that is our bread and wine but we are *each other’s bread and wine*. What does that mean – to be another’s bread and wine? Leaving the wine aside for today, how can we possibly be bread for each other?

Mennonites are known for food. We have a family friend whose teenager is lobbying hard to return to their Mennonite roots. One of the top 10 reasons is because the potlucks are better. We certainly do know how to feed each other. We share monthly fellowship meals, we eat together in small groups, as friends and neighbors, we make meals for each other when new babies are born, in times of sickness or surgery.

We feed others too, during Warm Nights when the family shelter is here in the church basement for a week during the winter. Six times a year we make and serve food at Community Café down the street at the United Methodist Church. We *do* food; we share recipes, we even write cookbooks.

But what does it mean to **be** bread for each other? Making bread for someone is different than “being” bread for someone. How do we offer ourselves lovingly and willingly to someone else as food? It is a scary thought for some of us. It is way too close to being a martyr, to allow ones self to be eaten, alive, to give until there is no more to give. We have worked a long time to get over the martyr complex, especially as women, now we should be bread?

Well, how are we bread for each other already? One of the ways that we are bread for each other is by offering our selves to this group, offering our gifts to be used in service to this congregation and even further. For some of us that

may be chairing a committee, for others it is learning all the names of the children in the church family. It may be making food but it may also be singing, playing an instrument, making a banner, picking up trash in the parking lot, welcoming our visitors, teaching Sunday School, counting the offering or any of many numerous ways we offer ourselves.

It is easy to get caught up wondering whether what we have to offer is really beautiful enough. Does the presentation measure up to what is expected in this wealthy, well-educated bunch? Is the church resume long enough? Do I look like a good enough Christian to be on the worship committee or church council?

Or perhaps it's our flavor that concerns us. Is my taste really what this congregation wants? What if I am just a bit too salty for this crowd?

As we are going through the gift discernment process, I worry about the basic question. Is there enough? What if who we are as bread and fish is not enough to feed all of those seated here in this grassy field? When I stop and look out over the crowd gathered, usually more than the hundred that Elisha fed but short of the 5000 that Jesus fed, I know that there is enough, if we can trust each other and trust God. There is no shortage of bread here. We are enough bread for each other, with some leftover to be shared with those outside this small room.

Last Sunday morning we had a congregational meeting to talk about the prospect of a new building for this congregation. There was excitement about the possibilities for fresh vision, for collaboration with other groups. There was also legitimate concern voiced that we are not a large enough group, that there is not enough money. These are important questions. It would be irresponsible to move ahead without properly assessing the situation. On the other hand to create some new vision, to move beyond ourselves, we have to somehow begin to say, "There is enough."

We are each other's bread and wine. When we offer ourselves to each other we begin to see the abundance. Sitting together in this large grassy spot already provided, listening for the voice of Jesus, receiving what is offered -- there will be enough. And let us pray that someday, with the disciples, we will be gathering up baskets of leftovers so that nothing is lost.