

The Bread of Life

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Isaiah 55, Selections
John 6: 27-47

Jesus did not hesitate to use symbols to teach and illustrate his truths. He “acted out” things. He spoke in parables. Sometimes his use of symbolic language got him into trouble. His disciples often would ask him what on earth he meant by his parables.

Today we will explore how Jesus used “bread” to explain himself, his mission in the world, and God’s ways with people. Jesus referred to himself as “the bread of life.” This got him into difficulty immediately because people thought he was arrogantly putting himself in the place of the “manna in the wilderness,” which was a sacred memory from their history. Then Jesus seemed to rub it in when he said that he was greater than the manna in the wilderness because manna had saved the people from physical starvation, but he was sent to save the world from spiritual hunger.

His claim of being the “bread of life” was so offensive that many of his followers left him. Jesus turned to those who were still with him and said, “Will you also go away?” Peter said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the word of eternal life.”

We will explore the meaning of “living bread.” We will put together the ingredients that go into the making of bread and we will talk about the process of making bread. We will try to discover how this speaks as a kind of metaphor for the spiritual life.

The first step in the baking process is to mix the yeast with a bit of sugar and water.

Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to yeast, which, he said, a woman hides within a large batch of flour. After a while, the whole lump of dough is leavened.

In order to saturate the whole lump of dough, the yeast must lose its own identity completely. It must chemically lose itself. It must totally disappear into the mass of the dough in order to do its work. This might be what Jesus had in mind when he said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

I noticed as you were speaking that the yeast has been dissolving in the water and sugar. These ingredients are just about ready to be used. The yeast and sugar have been interacting with each other.

Yeast cannot act on its own. The sugar is not needed to sweeten the bread. We will use brown sugar later to sweeten the dough. The sugar we mix together with the yeast is done so that it can interact chemically with the yeast. Of course, the whole thing has to happen in the presence of water, but we will talk about water a bit later.

Yeast and sugar are different from each other and yet they need each other to be effective. This might be an apt symbol of the church, where there are many different people who need each other. Even the yeast, whose purpose is to lose itself, cannot be a self-sacrificing servant without interacting with other ingredients in the bread. This speaks powerfully to the fact that even the most committed people, ready to give themselves to the work of the kingdom, still need other people who may differ in their perspectives.

I have been mixing other elements. I have put oatmeal and water and brown sugar and cooking oil into a large bowl. I have just added salt.

Salt was another symbol Jesus was fond of using. "You are the salt of the earth," he said to followers. "If the salt has lost its taste, it is good for nothing except to be thrown out and trodden under foot." This seems rather harsh.

It was the custom in those days to use salt for seasoning and preserving, and then, after it had been used, it would be thrown on pathways as a kind of sand. Jesus was using a very familiar symbol.

To say that we are "the salt of the earth" may have some of the same meaning that Jesus intended with the symbol of the yeast. Salt also has to lose itself within the lump of dough so that the whole lump can be tasty.

It is interesting to note that salt works against sugar, in that it retards the yeast while sugar causes the yeast to start working. The yeast would burn itself out in a hurry if there were no salt to slow it down as it works its way through the dough.

Maybe this is another good symbol for the church. We need the enthusiasm of the sugar as a stimulant but we also need the steady people who don't necessarily jump into things with great enthusiasm. Maybe the salty people ask the hard questions and keep a sense of realism where it's needed.

I find that to be a beautiful thought. Jesus actually used symbols that contradict each other. In one place he said the kingdom of heaven is like yeast

and in another he said his followers are like salt. They are contradictory but they actually need each other.

The bulkiest part of the dough is, of course, the flour, which you have been adding in great amounts as we speak. Jesus used the image of the whole loaf of bread as symbolic of the mass of humanity or the whole world. This huge mass of humanity must be saturated by the small amount of yeast and the small bit of salt.

The grain, the wheat and the field of wheat are symbols that are found everywhere in the teachings of Jesus. At the end of the age there will be the great harvest, and the wheat and weeds will be separated from each other. He spoke about the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies, and then gives life to the plant, referring to the truth from God that is planted in people's lives and indeed sometimes seems to die, but eventually it bears fruit.

Another important image that Jesus used often is the image of water. To the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus spoke of himself as the embodiment of "the living water."

Water has been a tremendously important symbol in the entire history of the church. Baptism by water is an ancient symbol, having been taken over by the church in its early days. Originally, baptism seems to have been a cleansing ceremony that the church made into its initiation ritual.

Let's go back to the bread. What is the importance of water in the bread making process?

Well, there just isn't any way to mix the ingredients together and meld them into one without adding water. Dry flour and salt and sugar will not interact with each other. The water has to be added for any process to occur.

Water is the basic to all of life as we know it. It seems that the function of water in the bread making process is an apt symbol for the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Water is what makes it possible for all the ingredients to meld together and do the work they must do.

We have talked about all the ingredients that go into the bread. But there are also things we could talk about regarding the processes, such as the kneading that I have been doing.

There is one interesting reference in the prophet Hosea, where he talks about the people as the dough, which the baker kneads and then leaves alone while the yeast causes it to rise. Do you have any hunches as to what the prophet might have meant?

A study of Israel's history makes it clear that they often felt pummeled by their Yahweh. They had enemies. They fought wars and did not always win them. They were carried away into captivity by the Babylonians. These difficult experiences were understood by the prophet as if God, the baker, were kneading them and making them into one loaf.

Maybe the prophet also recognized that between the times of being pummeled, there were also times of rest and renewal, when the leavening spirit of God was given a chance to grow within the people just like yeast is given the chance to do its work after the process of kneading dough is finished.

I have found it meaningful to think upon the total involvement that is needed on the part of the baker of bread. It is not particularly a clean and tidy job. You just have to dig in and punch away. You can't be too concerned about keeping your hands clean. This is the way God works also. Things get messy, but God works with people in a totally involved way. Hosea recognized this, and the New Testament tells us the story of how God did it.

This last process in the making of bread is baking this. This is an intensive process, involving a great amount of heat. The baking of bread has often been compared to the "trial by fire" endured by the church in its times of great persecutions. This trial by fire is what finally makes the bread edible. The loaf of bread, after it is baked, has to be broken in order to be shared, as we do in the service of communion.

There is a reference in the prophet Hosea to the people in Israel as a "half-baked cake." The baking of the dough cannot go halfway. There must be a willingness to go through the ordeal of baking completely and without reservation.

Whenever the church has been willing to go through the trial by fire, a great gift has been released into the human family. We see this in our Anabaptist parents. We are witnessing it in those areas where the church is persecuted today.

We have explored the many meanings we find in the symbol of the bread and the making of bread. Jesus used many of the same symbols in his teachings, as did the great Old Testament teachers. We hope that these meanings may grow within us and become a part of how we live and interact with each other and with our world. Amen.