

**Becoming Bread & Wine**  
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One of my most valuable learnings during my two years in Mennonite Voluntary Service is that you while you choose to live in a community, you don't choose your community. Unlike other kinds of intentional communities, you do not choose the people with whom you will share daily life, and you do not necessarily choose the same core values. A sense of close-knit community is not something that can be expected or forced.

That said, I learned to believe in the miracle of community as it happened organically — when it would rise up and surprise us; when it would hit me how intertwined our lives had become, like it or not; times our table was so full of people we ate in two circles around it. I learned that this did not come without a measure of intentionality — choosing to share and care for a house, to communicate regularly, to pause in our routines for recreation. And I learned that community was not disconnected from gathering and making and eating sustenance, from food, from basic needs being met and our dependence on one and other in having them met. There is something about that dependence that is binding, bonding and basic. Something that speaks to the bread and wine we share when we have communion.

I vividly recall the smooth, cool wood on my face in my youth, head bent as it rested on the church pew in front of me. Mind racing over my thoughts and deeds since the last time I went to that altar, wondering what sin I should account for. What to purge. For what to seek forgiveness. Reverberations of the old

gospel, "what can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again, nothing but the blood of Jesus."

That communion was like a chemical reaction. If you inserted it at the right place in the scientific process — after adding confession, dissolving sin, leaving a compounded forgiveness — your soul would neutralize and you'd walk away uncontaminated. If, however, that pasty wafer and juicy grape touched the lips with sin unaccounted for, it would expand and you might internally combust. The message was, "you'd better not eat till you're clean."

I have struggled with communion for quite awhile in my young adult life — it often seemed too connected to a gory version of Christianity that places sole emphasis on blood that saves only after bodies are broken. Alternative understandings of the Jesus story — along with communion — allow more room for metaphor and tie it to the essence of church community, which is alright in theory, but did not hold much meaning when I was not finding community in church. I became indifferent to the bread and wine supposedly revered as the common thread of our faith. It was mysterious and I avoided it when possible.

But in recent months, there has been this hunger. I would find myself in settings where communion was being served in a way that I did not want, but oh, I wanted it. I wanted it because it resembles the sustenance and centrality we claim as church, a church to which, whether I choose to or not, I realized, I will remain connected.

So I ask, what is this hunger about? For what are we hungry?

I recently read an excellent book called “Take This Bread” by journalist and activist Sara Miles. She tells the story of her journey to Christianity as an atheist (which honestly, are stories I usually find queasy). The thread of her story is food — being offered food from people without it during her years in Latin America writing about the revolutions in the 1980s; apprenticing a greasy restaurant chef in New York City; stumbling into St. Gregory’s of Nyssa in San Francisco one day and being offered communion, and without understanding why, taking it and knowing it changed her.

St. Gregory’s is this progressive Episcopalian church in San Francisco, known for its innovative liturgy surrounding the Eucharist, which is the center of their church and worship. The communion table is the focal point of the room, what you see when you first enter, and it is the climax of the service. Communion is offered to every one, every Sunday.

Sara reflects on the powerful relationship between our hunger for food and our hunger for connection. She realizes that it was not only experiences of food that wove themselves throughout her life, but that it was where she was finding food that she was finding community. This culminated when she was offered the bread and the wine, and she began to see this as the center of the Christian faith. Sara went on to start a food pantry at St. Gregory’s, where everyone is served, regardless of who they are, if they live in the right district, or if they have proper identification (a method used by U.S. food banks to screen and track down undocumented people). To Sara’s surprise, the people came hungry for bags of groceries, but they came for much more. Some stayed on to become

regular pantry volunteers, a group that ended up eating and praying together each week. Some came and asked for healing or to be married, to find an escape from cancer treatment, to find peace. The pantry at St. Gregory's was so fruitful that they were forced to open up several more around the city, to meet the demand. And like fishes and loaves, the resources to do so were provided.

My housemate Katelin and I were sitting in church back in May, after a particularly long stint away. The MVS house was in transition — we were getting ready to say goodbye, reflective on a year together, on expectations, disappointments and ways our community surpassed what we could have imagined. Fishes and loaves moments. Extending the table moments.

It was Pentecost, a communion Sunday. It was also new members Sunday. We listened to those joining this body — testimonies to the love and lives for justice and the active warmth and welcome of this congregation. And we sang, "What is this place," as we did today, and we had done before. But on that Sunday, the third verse struck me and stuck:

*And we accept bread at his table, broken and shared a living sign.*

*Here in this world, dying and living, we are each other's bread and wine.*

We are each other's bread and wine? Really?

We are not singing that we are like bread and wine, or that we share bread and wine, or that Jesus is our bread and wine. These may also be true, but we are singing that we are each other's bread and wine. There is great power in that statement. There is great responsibility in that statement.

Katelin and I looked at each other mid-song, aware of its resonance with our MVS community and the sustenance we had found, and I began to understand the implications of bread and wine — communion — as central to community, coming from a lived experience. It was about that hunger — hunger for food, for rest, for safety, the basics of life — but also hunger for connection, for those with whom to bear burdens and share joys. When these all can be found in the same place, it is called community.

We had communion that Sunday and it tasted different — eating bread not to make us broken, but whole, and being offered a drink from the cup of joy. It held meaning the context of this community. It has meaning in how we live as the body of Christ.

The story we heard read from Luke this morning is inspiring. After finding his tomb empty, Jesus' friends did not recognize him on the road. Yet, they offered him in as a stranger and shared a meal together. It was only then — *after* the bread had been broken — that they recognized Jesus, to their surprise.

This story invites us to ask what unexpected and surprising outcomes await when we invest in community, when communion becomes com-union. What happens when we care for the needs of each other, when we share meals and welcome the stranger? This is the miracle of the Jesus story — we see it all over the Gospel. It is food — sustenance — being found in cohesion with community. It is in the places of bread-breaking where Jesus is found, where justice is happening, where our eyes are opened to the miracles possible. Jesus reminds us of this significance by offering us the Eucharist — a meal that states

that what we do in remembrance is not only eat the bread and wine, but seek to become each other's bread and wine. Sustenance. Community.

I was amazed at what happened in our MVS community when we took a bit of intentionality and mixed it with the daily "breaking of bread." People outside of our community were drawn to us in ways I could not predict, drawn to something that welcomed and nourished. It connected people, and more often than not, it happened around big pots of soup or brunches that spanned into the afternoon. It was kind of like the miracle that is yeast when mixed with flour to produce bread, like Kaye's friendship bread. It is like the miracle of Christ when embodied to be a community that feeds and sustains the hunger in us all.

in closing, I share a poem that I wrote a couple of years ago upon reflecting on this miracle of yeast and on the breads and bodies found in the Jesus' life and resurrection.

### **Reflections on yeast, bread, body, Christ, rising**

*(Jesus said) the kin-dom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and mixed with three measure of flours until the dough began to rise*

*this is my body, broken for you, but I will rise on the third day*

Isn't it interesting  
that the kin-dom is like yeast  
that Christ's body is like bread  
bread that is broken  
body that is broken  
but that with yeast, bread rises  
but that within kin-dom, Christ rises  
resurrection at the supper table  
time & time again  
three meals, three days, three measures  
three measures feeding everybody  
three days saving everybody

three meals with everybody  
time & time again

Isn't it interesting  
that in Christ's story  
the body is coming from a woman  
the bread is baking by a woman  
the yeast is rising like a woman  
emerging now as kin

Isn't it interesting  
that it all is happening  
the baking, the breaking, the body, the rising  
at the common table  
at the common hour  
the Eucharist  
gratitude  
that the yeast is rising in the common people  
kneading our lives for justice  
but that the rising happens in re-action  
but that the resurrection happens in re-creation  
miracle  
yeast  
dough rising in a messianic world.

Amen.