

THE BREAD OF LIFE, AND THE LIFE OF BREAD

Jesus the Storyteller: Bread of Life

John 6:35-51; Deuteronomy 6:4-9

I think I understand why bread is so deeply associated with life.

I understand it from a historical perspective.

I understand it from a personal-emotional perspective,

I understand it from a theological perspective.

Bread as life, historically speaking,
is pretty straight-forward.

In virtually every culture, in virtually every period of history,
it is bread, in one form or another,
that is held up as the one essential food.

Bread is the one food necessary to sustain physical life.

Other foods are secondary and supplemental, to bread.

So the word “bread” is often used as a synonym for “food.”

“Breaking bread with someone,” is eating a meal with them.

It’s in the Lord’s Prayer that we pray here every Sunday,
and that some of us pray every day.

“Give us this day our daily bread” is a prayer
that God will provide physical food,
and *all* that we need to sustain physical life.

The metaphor goes beyond food,
to include all the necessities of life itself.

Being a “bread-winner” or “putting bread on the table”
means to provide whatever is needed for the life of a household.

So “bread” and “dough” have even become slang for money.

And from ancient times,

there has been an understanding that bread is made
from living matter itself.

Yeast is an active, living organism, a fungus.

Even long before science could identify and classify it,
people understood that the yeast culture
was something that needed to be “kept alive”
from one batch of loaves to the next.

So Jesus used a metaphor that everyone could easily grasp,

when he said “I am the bread of life.”

But I also understand this association of bread with life,
from a deeply personal and emotional perspective.

And I think all of you could do the same.

For me, it’s connected to my grandmother.

I well remember walking into my Grandma Kniss’ house
to the smell of bread baking.

My grandparents, Lloy and Elizabeth Kniss,
always lived far away from where I lived as a child.

So whenever we visited we were treated like royalty.

Often, when we first walked in the door
the smell of bread baking would be in the air.

And it wouldn’t be too long, before a piece was offered.

It was still warm when she placed it in my hands,
and it had been spread lightly with real butter,
and on top of that, some homemade apple butter.

I would sink my teeth into that large, thick slice of bread
and I was next to heaven.

The sheer pleasure of it was *partly* due to its novelty.

My mother did not bake bread when I was growing up.
I don’t hold it against her.

We lived in Florida, without air-conditioning.

I can understand how kneading bread dough,
and running an oven all day,
while chasing four kids around the house,
didn’t much appeal to her.

So eating Grandma’s homemade bread and apple butter
was more than just a good culinary experience.

It had multiple layers of meaning.

It was pure physical pleasure, of course.

But it also conjured up a sense of welcome and belonging.

The bread meant the same thing as her arms around my neck
and a kiss on my cheek when I first arrived.

Grandma was truly grateful that I was there, with *her*.
And she showed that with hugs and kisses and bread.

That slice of bread was a slice of her love.
The bread nourished me, body, mind, spirit.
It was life, in the fullest sense.

To this day, when I smell bread baking,
I think of my grandmother and her house of welcome.

I've learned since,
that soft, white bread, even the hearty homemade kind,
is not all there *is* to bread.
I used to not understand why some people liked bread
that was dark, hard, and crusty,
that almost hurt your teeth biting into it.
And for that matter,
why some people liked hard cheese
that puckered up your mouth,
when you could have Velveeta and Kraft American slices.

It's really only about ten years ago,
after doing some traveling in Europe,
and eating that combination of tough, crusty bread
and hard cheese,
that it dawned on me how wonderful it was.
Sitting around a butcher-block table
in a 300-year-old German farmhouse,
visiting with good friends,
and having to work a little bit
to eat these hearty, and basic food staples—
I understood, in yet another way,
why bread and life were so deeply connected.

Now, I *also* understand this association of bread with life,
from a biblical-theological perspective.
There are the stories in Exodus
about God sending manna, a literal bread from heaven,
to sustain the life of the wandering Israelites.
There is the prophet Elijah, during a time he was hiding for his life,
that God sent him ravens,

with bread in their beaks,
to keep him alive in his utter isolation.

Then Jesus in the wilderness, fasting for 40 days,
was tempted by Satan to turn the stones into bread,
to satisfy his body's severe hunger.
Jesus answered Satan with scripture,
"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."
Bread is life for the body, *yes*.
But he was talking about other kinds of life,
and other kinds of bread.

And, most famously, today's Gospel reading,
a parable-metaphor,
"I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."
And, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
Whoever eats of this bread will live forever;
and the bread that I will give for the life of the world
is my flesh."

In other words, Jesus was saying,
Just as bread is essential for earthly life.
So am *I* your bread, for your *heavenly* life.
Eat of me (metaphorically speaking)
and you will live forever.
And Jesus took this metaphor,
and acted it out physically
in his last supper with his disciples,
breaking the bread, and passing it out, and urging them,
"Eat this bread. It is my body,
which I am offering up to be broken,
so that you might live."

Every time we come to the communion table in gathered worship,
or in smaller group settings,
we are acting out this parable, this metaphor.
We are eating of the bread of life,
so that the life which is in the bread, will also be in us.

It's beautiful, this metaphor of bread as life.
And I understand it completely,
historically, personally, emotionally, biblically, theologically.
And so do *you all*, I'm sure.

We understand the bread of life, but what about the life of bread?
I mean, what is the nature of that life in the bread?
How *does* the life of bread become real in our experience?
How do we access that life?
How does it nourish us?
By what means does the bread of life, become *our* life?

It occurs to me,
that the life within the bread becomes our life,
only when it becomes a full and indistinguishable part of us,
only when it loses itself *in* us.
Physically speaking,
the bread we eat loses its bread-ness,
in our act of eating it.
It sacrifices itself,
so that the life it contains,
might take on a different form,
and course through our bloodstream.
That's why Jesus made it a point to break the bread,
and call the disciples' attention to his own soon-to-broken body.
In offering up his own body, his flesh,
Jesus was sacrificing life *for* life.
And, just as importantly,
he invited his disciples to make a regular practice of it.

He invited us to a way of life,
a way of regularly practicing the life of Christ,
practicing the life of broken bread.
He invited us to live into, to practice, a new model of the good life.
He invited us to see and experience the transformation made possible
when we let *our* life be subsumed in *his* life,
let *our* life be incorporated into *his* life,
let *our* brokenness be filled with *his* brokenness.

The *way* this happens—
and you've heard me say this before . . . often, and recently . . .
the way this happens is by
engaging in the practices of the Christian faith.

Bread does not become life to us
by some magical one-time transfer
of the life in the bread to the life in our body.
As if we eat the mystical bread,
and *voila!*, now that life is inside us.
No, it only becomes life if it's our daily bread.
Only if we repeatedly, and intentionally, and communally,
offer up our own small and self-oriented life,
and partake of Christ the living bread.

Sometimes this happens in a practice involving
literal, physical bread,
like when we partake of bread during communion,
or . . . like in our particular small group,
a frequent practice in our weekly meals
is to pass the bread to each other around the table.
We often purposely leave the bread un-sliced,
so that we must physically break it, and pass it.
Sometimes, we've even spoken words when we pass it,
"remember Jesus, the bread of life" or something along that line.

However, most of the time, the practices I speak of
don't involve physical bread.
But just as powerfully, they invite the real presence of Christ,
into the everyday stuff of our earthly lives,
to nourish and transform us.
This can be praying our daily prayers,
sometimes called "the daily office,"
with ourselves or with others.
It can be gathering for the reading and study of scripture.
It can be meeting for mutual discernment.
It can be *this* practice of corporate worship,
of singing our faith,
of moving our bodies

in praise, or dance, or postures of confession.
It can be the practice of public, prophetic witness.
It can be the practice of telling the Gospel story.
It can be the practice of confession and reconciliation.
It can be the practice of humble service and
washing the feet of another, literally or figuratively.

The more we practice the life of Christ,
the living bread,
our daily bread,
the more that life of the bread, becomes our life.

It's not unlike what happens
in the Jewish practice of reciting the "Shema."

We read that this morning, just before the milestone recognitions.
Those verses are the heart of Jewish faith and identity.
Virtually *every* Jewish man, woman, and child
knows the original Hebrew words for the first verse of that text:
"Shema, Israel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad."
"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One."

People of Jewish faith know the words because, still *today*,
they are recited multiple times a day.
Getting up in the morning, going to bed at night,
as a preface to many of their prayers.
For the more devout Jews,
they are printed on paper, and rolled into tiny scrolls,
in tucked into tiny containers,
and attached to doorframes and gateposts,
and they are touched or kissed every time they are passed by.
Or they are put in leather boxes and strapped to their foreheads
or wrists while they pray.
In these practices, they follow the instructions of Moses, *literally*,
in Deuteronomy 6, which we read:
"Bind them as a sign on your hand,
fix them as an emblem on your forehead,
and write them on the doorposts of your house

and on your gates."
Whether through touch, or sight, or hearing,
these words, called "The Shema,"
are served up multiple times a day.
They are eaten like bread.

The Jewish people—as a community—feast on these words.
They ingest them,
so that, like daily bread,
they are no longer merely words.
They lose their word-ness.
And take on a different form of life.
And course through their *spiritual* bloodstream.
The very identity of the Jewish people is wrapped up *somehow*
in these words.
The words become a spiritual home base.
They are words of life to them.
"Shema, Israel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad."
"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One."

Now why has seeing, touching, hearing, or speaking these words
taken on such deep significance?
Because it has become a physical practice,
a regular, purposeful, communal practice.
Every day, multiple times a day,
they are reminded who they are,
and who they belong to.

That is the way the practices of our faith should shape us.

This is a challenge for all of us,
no matter what our stage of life or our line of work.

But today, on this Back-to-School Sunday,
I want to *especially* challenge the students among us—
elementary, high-school, college, or graduate students.
Study your lessons hard, *do* the homework, *learn* the information,
but do not neglect the core practices of our faith.
We learn for life, when we submit *both* our minds *and* our bodies,

to formational practices.

Find some ritual . . . and stick to it . . .

whether it's 15 minutes when you first rise in the morning,
or whether it's reciting the Lord's Prayer as you hustle

to your next class,

or whether it's prioritizing time with your faith community

for worship, for prayer, for singing, for communion,

even when the work load gets heavy.

Maybe *especially* when the work load gets heavy.

And the rest of us can find similar ways to practice

the life of the bread of life,

no matter *what* our schedule, or lack thereof.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

So that we may eat of it, and not die,

but live fully, now and eternally.

In the words of the poet Kenneth Morse,

Bread of life, whose body, broken,

feeds the hunger of my heart,

may the thanks that you have spoken

bless each loaf I break apart.

Let these hands now calmly folding

speak my gratitude for grace,

lest the treasure I am holding

disappear before my face.

Lord, I welcome you to table;

grace my supper ever new.

With your feast of love enable

every guest to live for you.

Let's sing this poem together. #455 in the *Hymnal: Worship Book*.

—Phil Kniss, August 28, 2011