

Bakerwoman God ~ Jesus, The Bread of Life

John 6:24-35

(Jesus is the Bread of Life, though he says he doesn't provide "manna.")

Several weeks ago, when we reflected upon the horrific earthquake and tsunami centered in Japan, we pondered God's role in helping humanity in the midst of natural disasters. One way of thinking about God's role at such times is as the Choreographer of Chaos. Two weeks ago Karen Gardner and the Guatemala mission team members encouraged us to think of God as Weaver, weaving humanity together through care and acts of compassion. Last week we considered God as Graffiti Artist, "writing" guidance for changes in behavior in our hearts and minds and even through friends who help us to see ourselves.

Today as we celebrate communion during Lent, we're thinking of God as like a Bakerwoman. The prayer poem which is on the front of our bulletin went zooming around the world about 20 years ago. We can't exactly say it went "viral" back then, but somehow even without the internet, it popped up many places, because it hit a chord. We speak of God as the Divine Physician or as the Author of Live Divine. What a powerful way to imagine God--as a Baker, or a Bakerwoman, holding and kneading **us**, encouraging **us** to rise. Bakerwoman even breaking us open, when we are ready, for the sake of the world. While it seems new to think of God as Bakerwoman, so much that it struck a chord in the hearts of many a while back, it is not new at all to think of Jesus as the Bread of Life.

Jesus made about a half a dozen or so, "I am . . ." statements: "I am the Light"; "I am the Door"; "I am the Way." One of his "I am" statements is this: "I am the Bread of Life."

Bread is connected to some of the most meaningful times of our lives. As with pretzels, invented for eating during Lent as arms praying, in the 6th century, so lots of bread has symbolic meaning: hotcross buns, Irish soda bread, matza...

Think about a time when bread was a significant part of a *memorable* meal. Think about the laughter, the tears, the emotions, and perhaps the conversation that happened during that meal.

What memories of bread do you have?

I remember dipping a serving spoon into my first Southern style "spoon bread." From the recipe, I had *no idea* what to expect—I'd never eaten any "spoon bread" before. To my surprise, it was soft inside and absolutely mouth watering. My family watched and waited cautiously for my reaction before they dished any spoon bread onto their plates. Through tasting a unique Southern recipe, I found myself surprisingly connected with Southerners... in an unexpected and appreciative way. I could actually say that I felt something "soulful" about that bread.

The people around Jesus remembered a meal, too—the miracle meal of just the day before, when Jesus managed to feed five thousand people with only a few loaves and fishes. They remembered that meal, and now, on the other side of the lake, they wanted Jesus to provide them with another such meal. This time, Jesus was reluctant, even disappointed in them. He responded "...you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill."

What has gotten into Jesus? It seems as if he had what today we'd call "an attitude"?

It appears that the people seemed to think they could persuade Jesus to provide his miracle bread if they recollected for him another miracle bread—a famous bread of their Jewish tradition that came directly from God to their starving great-great-grandparents. Those children of Israel a long time earlier were wandering the deserts of Sinai about to die of hunger. Of

course, as Jews, they were praying to God. One morning according to tradition, they came out of their tents to find heaven-sent food on the ground.¹ Some of them said: "What is it? Look here! Come, behold!" In Hebrew, the words for "What?" and "Behold" was "Manna," so that became what they called this food--"manna." Each morning the Israelites in the desert gathered all the "manna" they needed to eat that day. There are all sorts of conjectures about what it was that these people found to eat, early each morning but for them, it became truly bread from heaven.²

"It's like manna from heaven" is an expression some of us say when something comes to us when we really need it. "Manna" has come to mean good that was unexpected. Manna for wandering hungry people provided not just calories, but also fed souls.

Did reminding Jesus about the "manna" provided for their ancestors persuade Jesus to give them bread they could eat that day on the other side of the lake?

No. What the people got from Jesus, instead of bread, was a *confusing answer*. The confusion came because Jesus and the people were talking about "bread" *with two different levels of meaning at the same time*.

It is true, the day before Jesus had fed the people bread that stopped their physical hunger. He was not opposed to giving them sandwiches when they absolutely needed it.

However, the Gospel writer, John, wants us to know that Jesus is more than a wonder worker, or a Wonder Bread Baker. Jesus came to feed us with what lasts forever; he came to give us the bread of heaven, in fact Jesus *is* "The Bread of Heaven," "The Bread of Life." **If we allow Jesus' being and teaching to be in us, we are nourished forever. Jesus wanted to feed a deep hunger--our human hunger for life in close relationship with God.**

The people heard Jesus on one level, while he sought to move them to a different level. Today WE understand the symbolic meaning of what Jesus was saying. This passage about Jesus being the Bread of Life is simple, right?

Actually, I think that we today live with the same tension that Jesus--and the crowd--lived with. We feel called to feed the hungry, with real tangible food, **and** we want to be an avenue for "spiritual food," for those who are soul-hungry. We as a congregation are called to offer sandwiches **and** communion It's not only that we want to help others. **We, too, want "Our daily bread" and also "Soul food, daily."**

Remember, Jesus DID feed the crowd when they really needed food. He didn't argue against feeding hungry people—in fact **right after he invited people to "feed on me," it is written he commanded them to "Feed my sheep."**

"Feeding on me," the Bread of Life, provides soul-nourishment, a sense of the spiritual depth of life. "Feeding my sheep" provides literal life to others in need--and surely also a deeper connection between God's precious creatures.

The times we break bread together can be "incarnational" experiences. That is, we experience God with us BOTH when we receive communion on Sundays and when we 100 or so people eat dinners together on Wednesdays or at Breaking Bread Fellowship Groups in each others' homes. The Saturday meals shared with hungry as part of the SHARE ministry provide not just food, but through our relationships, *become soul food*.

We pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." We may be surprised where **we** find our daily bread, even what it looks like! Yes, it may look like Elizabeth McCrary's warm bread or Sharon Huestis' cookies with our coffee after worship.

However, as we become increasingly aware of the abundant ways in which God is present and gives us daily bread for our journey, **we see that in the wilderness places of our lives, God feeds us with the manna of healing and hope. In the lonely places, God provides**

us with the food of *compassion and community*. Even in the presence of so-called “enemies,” God sets the table of *reconciliation and peace*. This is the bread that endures. This is the Bread of Life. When we look carefully, like the Hebrews in the wilderness did, **we will find soul food** which nourishes us. We need to be nourished, find nourishing activities, relationship with Bakerwoman God... who surely...wants us to be nourished...

As we receive, “The Bread of Life” during Holy Communion today, may we *accept*—at a deep level—this food that feeds our souls and helps us to feed and to be fed by others.

¹ Al Newell recollected that it is supposed that the people found carob on the ground.

² When the people ask Moses and Aaron "what is it?" they answered, "It is the bread that God has given you to eat." Jesus reminds the crowd who demand of him more bread that the miracle of the loaves a day before was indeed given by God. And that seeking bread that satisfied our bodies only leaves us hungry the next day...to turn to Jesus only for the physical and immediate needs misses the significance of who Jesus is, and the significance of what life itself is all about. Manna was only good for 24 hours, then spoils. The people only received a day's worth at a time