

It's Kind of Fun to Do the Impossible
Meditation at Redlands United Church of Christ by Loring Fiske-Phillips
August 9, 2009

Gospel Reading:
John 6:35, 41-51

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Creator who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Creator comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Creator except the one who is from God; he has seen the Creator. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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."

It's become somewhat of a tradition when Sharon is gone to make references to Disney. In fact, for all we know, she could be at the Holy Shrine of St. Mickey of Anaheim this very moment. But, in the best tradition of the "hidden Mickey," the Disney reference today is in the title of my meditation: "It's Kind of Fun to Do the Impossible." That is a quote from Walt himself.

One of my fond memories growing up was baking with my Grandmother. She loved food, loved to bake, loved what it meant to serve it to others. My sisters and I called her Mammo and I don't believe there was any of my approximately twenty cousins who did not enjoy coming to her house and taking part in the feast of creation, shared meals and nourishment that came from her kitchen. I was especially fortunate because during my teenage years Mammo lived right next door. Her home, her kitchen and her heart were always open.

As I read over the scripture for today, John's words reminded me of her presence, our conversations and of course, the bread, fresh from the oven, spread with butter, the whole thing seeming to melt in your mouth. Ahhh, and the smell ... mmmm. The deliciousness of that bread was as much in your nose as on your taste buds. I realized that the analogies that Jesus uses in this passage: "the bread of life," "the bread that comes down from heaven," "living bread" *connected* for me *because of my experiences* as I'm sure Jesus knew they would *connect* for his audience that day because of theirs. For as Henry David Thoreau said, "All perception of truth is the detection of an analogy."

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The reason the analogy worked for Jesus' audience was that bread was vital to survival in Biblical days. It was a way to turn crops into something that was portable, didn't require refrigeration, and provided plenty of calories for each day's sustenance. When Jesus made reference to bread, the people knew he wasn't talking about something they rarely experienced, but something they thought about, touched, and ate every day.

The reason it connected so strongly for me was not because of the *existence* of bread in my life, for there are plenty of food options today that do not involve bread. In fact, we likely think of bread as an accompaniment to our diets, not a basic need for survival. In a restaurant, bread is usually brought out as a form of appetizer, most often at no extra charge, and many people probably think, "I don't want to fill up on bread, so I make sure I have enough room left for the *real* meal."

This passage connected for me because of my experience with the *process* of bread. You see, it was more than just gathering the ingredients in the right proportions and eating the results. The process of homemade bread with Mammo involved three stages:

- Making the bread together;
- eating the bread together; and
- being nourished by the bread after eating it.

Making the bread together involved some modern appliances, some ancient techniques and the spending of several hours in each other's company. We started with several scoops from her big bucket of wheat. That went into the mill to be turned into flour. We gathered the rest of the simple ingredients: yeast, salt, oil, honey, and some warm water to activate the yeast. Soon we were kneading the dough, covered in flour up to our chins. The big mound of dough was worked back and forth, and up and down on the counter. And then, one of my very clear memories is *forming* the dough into loaves. I recall coating our hands in oil and tucking the freshly-kneaded dough under to make a beautiful dome-shaped loaf that went into the pan to rise.

Jesus references this part of the process in his analogy as well. He said "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Creator who sent me ... they shall all be taught by God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Creator comes to me." The lessons Jesus was teaching did not come in a flash, just as the bread does not get thrown together, given a quick stir and then pop into the oven. The people listening to Jesus would definitely have been able to relate, because they knew firsthand about the lengthy process of planting, milling, mixing and baking. It takes a lot of thinking, reading, discussing, and discerning to understand God's Word.

How many times have we read something and thought we understood it, then upon further reflection, found new and different meanings? Wouldn't you agree that we might be hearing the still-speaking voice of God? We have similar experiences in our lives as we do things like Bible study, prayer, meditation, singing, reading, walking the labyrinth, listening and other disciplines that allow the "bread to rise" in our lives and in our spirit. We cannot come to church on Sunday morning and just give our spirits a quick stir and

expect to look through the oven door and see a rack full of the golden loaves of God's wisdom. When I baked bread with Mammo, we ended up with more than bread. We had a shared experience. What do we get when we bake with God? Part of the flavor comes not from placing the hot buttered bread on our tongues, although that *is* heavenly, but rather from sharing the experience together.

And that leads us to the second stage of the process, eating the bread. When we sat down together to eat the bread we had made, it became more than food. The mealtime we spent together was an opportunity to share, learn and love each other. Time to reflect on the day, ask for advice, reminisce about the good old days and just enjoy each other's presence. You've read about the studies that have been done on the importance of eating together. One study, reported the New York Times, found that kids who had seven or more family meals a week were far less likely to smoke, drink alcohol or use marijuana than those who did not. My grandmother hadn't read those studies but she knew the importance of family time and knew that family time *at meals* was especially sacred.

In our scripture, John quotes Jesus as saying, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Now, I have to admit that at the end of most of Mammo's meals, I felt I would never be hungry or thirsty again, but I don't think that's what Jesus was referring to. Even when the religious leaders taunt him, saying, "Look, we know who you are, we know your parents, you're just a regular guy," Jesus tells them to quit complaining. The Holy Spirit is moving among them and they need to stop and smell the ... bread. They are too focused on their plates to realize the whole sumptuous meal is passing them by.

When we get together for special events, they almost always involve food. Some of you are probably thinking that if I'd just hurry this along, you could get out there to Covenant Hall to that brownie that's calling your name. But I also know you're going to listen with delight until the timer goes off. But seriously, if you have been coming to the Summer Series, you have felt the powerful force of togetherness during the meal. The first night, when Sharon and I were leading, we were having such a great time with the meal, we lost track of time and started the "official" part of the program 20 minutes late! Those are the times we deeply experience the presence of one another and the presence of the Holy. It's during those special events, during those mealtimes, during the shared experience with our family and fellow human beings that it becomes a meal instead of just food.

Now back to Mammo and the third stage of the bread process, which began *after* we had eaten it. After ingesting the bread, after taking it in, it became part of me, part of my life, part of my body and blood. And it still lives in me today. What did Mammo's recipes bake into my life? She believed in service, that's part of me. She believed in teaching values, so do I. She was devoted to her church and family, and I, well, I'm here in the pulpit and my kids are on summer internships halfway across the country! The bottom line is: Because she valued it, I value it and because she lived it, I live it.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." We are still partaking of that bread 2000 years later. Even

though we don't know exactly what Jesus said or did, we do have a pretty good idea of how he thought. His teachings have become part of who we are, part of our lives. His recipe for living has had a longer life than anything on the Food Channel. "This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die."

Think about your own life and the life of the church. There are so many saints who breathe life into us, into our collective body. How have they become part of who you are? I have heard so many stories about people who were touched by simple actions such as a hug or a few words of acceptance. And, like the yeast in the bread, these small things can double or triple their impact when warmed by the love of God. That's what you get when you bake with God. This simple recipe can feed thousands.

Finally, remember this. Bread is a powerful source of energy. Prepare it, eat it, be nourished by it. Take that energy out into the world and do what the Baker has taught you.