

Connecting with God: Bread

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A young woman remembers visiting her boyfriend's family, and waking up during the night in the guest room. She could hear someone in the kitchen. She peeked out the door and saw her boyfriend's grandfather opening a cabinet. He took out a loaf of bread, held it up in front of him, and said "Brot," bread in German. Then he put the loaf away and went back upstairs to bed. She asked her boyfriend about it, and he said his grandfather had survived the Holocaust, nearly starving. He still woke up in the night sometimes and went to the kitchen to hold bread, giving thanks and reassuring himself that it was still there.

I remembered that story when I read recently that in refugee camps, children are sometimes given a piece of bread to hold when they're put to bed; they sleep better knowing there will be something to eat tomorrow.

Bread has a deep meaning for human beings far beyond its taste and nutritional value. Bread is the staff of life as the saying goes, existing in some form in almost every culture and symbolizing life, sustenance, hope. Bread is loaded with rich associations: breaking bread together is a mark of friendship; in fact, the word companion comes from the Latin "with bread." A friend is one you share bread with. Feasts bring families and friends together and give us some of our favorite memories and foundational experiences of belonging. My kids associate breads with the different places we lived. In San Angelo, we bought fruit kolaches every year from the Czech ladies at the Wall Brethren Church in Wall, Texas. In Victoria, a church member who had been a cook in the Navy made delicious sourdough bread cooked in coffee cans and sold the loaves to raise money for mission. We bought all we could. In Corpus Christi, our son Chris got a job in a bakery/coffee house and learned to make scones, which he still makes for us every year at Christmas. "Food is a language of care," says NT Wright, and bread signifies nourishment, love, connection.

Of course, bread is especially significant in the Christian faith: the one miracle story told in all four gospels is the multiplication of the loaves and fish to feed huge, hungry crowds. In our scripture reading today, Jesus has just done that and, conversing with some in the crowd, he calls himself bread. He refers to the Old Testament story where God feeds the Israelites in the wilderness with a mysterious substance called manna, which comes down from heaven like dew and then turns into a kind of a flaky crust; it's given to them every day but can't be saved and hoarded. This bread from heaven sustains them through the wilderness.

So Jesus takes this image of the manna and transforms it. He says "I am the bread of heaven but this bread is eternal, not perishable. I am the bread of God that comes down to give life to the world." On the night before his death, he completes that image

when he breaks bread and gives it to the disciples saying, "This is my body broken for you." NT Wright comments, "when Jesus wanted to explain what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give a theory or a text, he gave them a meal." Jesus let them experience in that meal what he was about to do: giving his own self as food to give us life. Giving himself to satisfy our spiritual hunger by connecting us with God.

Ever since, communion has been the central act of worship for Christians. "The first thing the world knew about Christians was that they ate together. At the beginning of the week they gathered--rich and poor, slave and free, Jews and Gentiles, women and men—to celebrate the resurrection of their Lord. While each community worshipped a bit differently, it appears that most practiced communion by enjoying a full meal with special prayers of thanks for the bread and the wine. They remembered Jesus with food, stories, laughter, tears, discussion." (RHE 125) In breaking the bread and sharing the cup, they followed Jesus' last instructions – and it's striking that "Jesus didn't leave them with ideas or doctrines but instead gave them things to DO together. Do this, he said, not believe this but do this in remembrance of me." (RHE 126)

And we continue to do it today, acting out the rich symbolism of bread as a sign of God's love. As grain is gathered to make one loaf, we are gathered into one body, one people, sharing the bread. The bread is broken as Christ's body was broken, as all of us are broken. And out of that brokenness comes giving, as the bread is offered. And the only way we can receive the bread is to open our hands, to stand there empty handed, admitting that we don't have the answers, we don't have the power, we're not in control. All we can do is receive grace, God's favor freely given to us, with nothing to offer back but our thanks.

Rachel Held Evans writes "I need the Eucharist because I need to begin each week with open hands, because I need to practice letting go, because I need to quit keeping score." Don't you feel that too? We need this humble meal to reorient ourselves to God and reclaim peace. And we need that not only individually but also as a community living out in the world. Holy Communion is subversive to the ways of the world that so often suck us in and lead us into prejudice and violence. At Christ's table everyone is welcome, the despised and outcasts are honored --and this table has to shape the way we look at the world.

Michael Curry, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, tells a story of a young woman who became an Episcopalian in the 1940's. One Sunday she invited the man she had been dating to come to church with her. They were both African American but the church was white and in a segregated state. The young man waited in the pew watching while the congregation went forward to receive communion, worried because everyone was drinking from the same chalice. He watched his girlfriend receive the bread. Then the priest lowered the cup to her lips and said, as he had to the others, "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and

soul unto everlasting life." The man decided that any church where black and white could drink from the same cup had discovered something powerful, something he wanted to be part of. That young man and woman became Bishop Curry's parents. (RHE 150)

The communion table reminds us that people who don't deserve it are welcome here, starting with you and me. It reminds us that this is God's table and God's dream is a feast where no one is hungry and everyone is welcome.

A simple piece of bread signifies all that. It signifies the richness of life, the joy of community, the goodness of the earth we live on. God's glory resides in the stuff of everyday life. Thanks be to God.

Quotations from Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, Thomas Henry Publ., 2015.