
The Ritual of Sharing

When I was a young woman I had the blessing and the challenge of living and working as an au pair in Paris, France for three months.

During that time, I was able to meet several goals I had set for myself.

These included becoming a fluent speaker of French as well as living independently abroad for a time.

While I ultimately achieved both of these goals it took me some time to integrate all I had experienced over the course of that three months.

One of the things I also learned during that time was the centrality of bread in the everyday lives of Parisians.

You might say, picking up a fresh baguette from the boulangerie each morning was an essential task for my au pair family's daily life.

This came back to me again last fall and winter when I hosted a young Italian high school student in my home in Vancouver for five months.

Only in her case, it wasn't daily bread that was essential but a daily serving of pasta.

I can still hear her faltering English as my student explained to me how hard it was not to have pasta every day.

The key thing I want to emphasize from both of these stories is this: It wasn't so much the baguette or the pasta that was essential but rather the ritual of sharing it together at the breakfast or the dinner table.

Knowing what's essential is also at the heart of our text from scripture this morning.

We pick up close to where we left off last Sunday as we hear an encounter between the crowds and Jesus now gathered at Capernaum.

Sustained by the five loaves and two small fish Jesus blessed and shared with them on the mountaintop, the crowd wants more of Jesus.

Once again, as is the pattern in John's gospel, the conversation begins with a series of questions from the crowd followed by puzzling answers from Jesus.

As is often the case in these dialogues, Jesus doesn't answer them directly but skips ahead and responds to what might be motivating them.

This then paves the way for what we have come to know as Jesus' Bread of Life discourse.

In a nutshell, he tells the crowd they need to focus more on the bigger picture of what's God is doing with and through him.

Here, Jesus invites his listeners to take the proverbial leap of faith to look beyond the obvious, but it's hard work for them.

Yes, the crowd can see the parallels between Jesus as a leader who meets their needs just as Moses did with the manna and quail in the wilderness.

But still, they're having trouble connecting the dots.

'Show us more signs', they clamor.

'Give us the skills to do the miracles that you do', they intone.

Now, thinking on all of this from Jesus' perspective, if he sounds a little cranky, can you blame him?

After all, he's been performing signs and miracles that completely set him apart from any teacher, healer, leader, or prophet who has guided God's people up to this point in time.

Still, the people clamor for more, more, more.

They seem to have an insatiable appetite for their questions to be answered the way they want them answered.

Or perhaps they are just like us—they need time and practice and experience to really see the big picture, to really get what is happening, and to buy in to the new thing that Jesus' is claiming as essential.

The whole point of the Bread of Life discourse is for the clamoring crowds to understand that God will provide and sustain their needs through their leaders.

Whether it be Moses or Jesus, it is God who provides and sustains.

Whether it be manna and quail in the wilderness or an abundance of food on the mountaintop, it is God who provides and sustains.

Here in his Bread of Life discourse, Jesus invites the clamoring crowds to come and see and to believe in something much wider, broader, deeper, and more comprehensive than the mind they have.

Here, Jesus reminds them that God has set God's seal upon him and that he is so much more than a teacher, or a healer, or a leader.

Here, Jesus, son of a middle aged carpenter called Joseph and a young girl peasant girl called Mary, reveals himself as the very embodiment of God-in flesh and blood, in sweat and in tears, and in passionate hope for creating a decidedly different way of being in the world.

It will take his followers a long, long time to come to terms with what they

hear Jesus call himself here in the Bread of Life Discourse.

In my mind's eye, I can see them working hard to integrate what they have known with what they need to focus on in coming days.

In my mind's eye, it feels as though they are standing in a pivotal place.

Looking back they can see where they have come from and because of Jesus' words, they might be able to begin to risk seeing their history in a new light.

From the vantage point of the present moment, I see them standing on the brink of new life and a new way of seeing themselves and one another as co-participants with God through Jesus in the building of a new way of being in the world.

If they can connect the dots bridging the gap between how they have always understood things to be and how God wants them to become, just maybe they will be able to enter into this new way of being in relationship together.

One of the hallmarks of John's gospel is its emphasis on spiritual rather than historical matters. Here, in two different places in the reading, Jesus encourages his followers to become conscious of the spiritual nourishment he offers.

To be sure, this is no small task for those first listeners.

Many, if not most of them would be only too familiar with the reality of physical hunger.

Still, Jesus' focus here in the Bread of Life discourse is to encourage them to think beyond the mind they have.

His encouragement is for them to see in him the embodiment of God's compassionate and abundant love shining through all the signs and miracles he performs.

In the first of the "I am" statements, Jesus refers to himself as the Bread of Life.

Here, Jesus invites them to see that relationship with him as the embodiment of God's divine and compassionate love is essential.

This is a lot for the large crowd to digest!

This is a lot for us to digest!

Jesus, God with skin on, invites us to come and see and believe relationship with him is essential for our spiritual well being.

This morning's message concludes as the second of five focusing on the sixth chapter of John's gospel. Last week you may recall that you were invited to consider taking on a spiritual practice question for the week. The task was to consider what blessings we ask from Jesus-are they more material or more spiritual in nature. This week, we are invited to consider a new spiritual practice question and next week I've

invited Laura Nivens, a woman trained in lay licensed worship leadership and spiritual direction to have a dialogue with me about how she might use her spiritual practices toolkit to approach next week's text. So stay tuned for that. In the meantime, this morning as we come to the sacrament of communion, I invite you to consider what helps you to know God's presence moment by moment. Is it in the breaking and sharing of the bread, the pouring of the symbolic wine, or the prayers we use to re-member the body of Christ as we memorialize what Jesus did at the Last Supper? Is it in the coming forward and the singing of beloved communion hymns?

Whatever it is that helps you to know that God is present moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day in the coming week, we also know this: God is good!

May it be so, amen!

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