

The Bread of Life

Some years ago, I travelled by train from New Orleans to Memphis, then by bus to Nashville. Arriving at the station in Memphis I found a cab to take us to the hotel we'd booked not far from Beale Street. It was raining and dark, a strange city and very unfamiliar feeling. In researching the trip from Edmonton, I'd noticed how much less expensive the hotels in West Memphis were compared to Memphis proper. Having learned somewhat from earlier trips, cheaper isn't necessarily better. For example, in Cranbrook at a cheap motel the pillows were so flat I bought new ones at Zellers to sleep on and never did get the free game of mini golf I'd be promised!

Our cab driver that night filled me in on West Memphis. In his words "them folks are the type to go on Jerry Springer, they got no 'lectricity or indoor plumbing, no manners at all" In short, nothing good ever came out of West Memphis.

On that same trip I experienced some new foods, after all I was way down south from Edmonton AB. I tried frogs' legs, pretty much what I'd been told about them was true. We had some thick fried baloney sandwiches with pickles, ate crawfish and alligator; mostly just to say I had. And learned

about "hush puppies" which I knew as a brand of shoes. Hush puppies, for those who aren't familiar are balls of cornmeal dough, deep fried, like a fritter, fed to dogs to 'hush' them when they are hungry, often attributed to hunters, fishermen, or other cooks who would fry some basic cornmeal mixture (possibly that they had been bread-coating or battering their own food with) and feed it to their dogs to "hush the puppies" during cook-outs or fish-fries. Other legends date the term to the Civil War, in which Confederate soldiers are said to have tossed fried cornbread to quell the barks of their dogs.

Now hush puppies are a staple of the southerners and are sides to fish dinners, soups. Made of cornmeal as it was a staple crop in Native American cooking, as opposed to flour.

Amazing what I learn on a vacation.

It has long seemed to me that every nation, culture or ethnic group has its own version of "hush puppies" In my home growing up it was white homemade bread, never whole wheat or brown bread, if it was homemade it was white. To come in after school and smell that baking was a treat! It was usually served in the winter with a pot

of homemade soup, not such a treat at my house, and again for dessert with thick strawberry jam on it. Or cinnamon buns! Mom didn't put near as much brown sugar and raisins in her pans as Grandma did.

As we begin to venture out to friend's homes and learn new customs we "meet" different versions of a basic mix of flour and water, often with a leavening agent. I think of mothers all around the world devising ways to help fill up their families with what is available. Whether dumplings, perogies, pita bread, naan bread, rye loaves, pizza crust every culture seems to have a 'bread' that truly was the staff of life and true sustenance. In good times it was possibly served with a hearty stew or curry, in tough times maybe that's all there was. (A man of Irish decent recently told me of his childhood memory of "champ' a cup of strong tea with chunks of dry bread soaking. Not much to eat but good memories of his Mam being there when he came in from school)

Bread in all its forms comforts us on a very deep level, perhaps even a spiritual level, as our beautiful custom of sharing Communion does, as we did last Sunday.

I have a lovely book entitled "Sleeping with the bread" written by Denis Linn, his wife Sheila and his brother Matthew. The entire title is "sleeping with the bread, holding what gives you life." Based on a practice from refugee camps for children during WW II, [READ EXCERPT.....]

As bread is life so is Jesus and his teachings. The book of John records some of his miracles and lessons that the author saw as metaphors used to explain some difficult to understand concepts. Jesus said "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst" by saying this did Jesus mean that as bread sustains us in life, he can sustain his followers in a spiritual sense. Some resources maintain the author, John, regards Jesus as a human being who possessed actual flesh and blood, the same as other people. After all, didn't the people of Nazareth remember him as a child, growing up with his parents Joseph and Mary. The writer seems to be saying Jesus was special in that he had the divine spirit within him, what we often refer to as the "**Logos**" Perhaps not a word we often hear in United Church but the meaning is clear; the Spirit of God. John seems to wish to unite the believer with God, human and divine in individuals, a mystical union.

Differing from the gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke where the miracles are seen and interpreted as proof Jesus is the living Messiah, the book of John seems to take a slightly different approach to the same stories. For example, the feeding of the 5000, is told by the previous gospels as evidence that Jesus is the Messiah by making the volume of food appear. To John, the amount of food is not of primary importance. The lesson here is the story is that spiritual food alone can sustain the quality of living that

followers of Jesus dwell in. Jesus says more than once "I am the bread of life" "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." Did he mean if people allow the way of Jesus, the spirit of God into them and enter into the presence of God they will be forever nourished? It is the presence of the Logos in human life that truly nourishes the spiritual quality of a person's life. Just as Jesus, by virtue of the spirit, gives the living water that brings eternal life, so he gives the food that can bring a new quality of life to the world.

The book of John is full of miracle stories but they alone are not John's prime message, he takes a more mystical view. The miracles are not so much evidence of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, but as demonstrations of the presence of the power of God, which brings about a transformation in peoples' lives. The presence that was abundant in Jesus and is still in our world today.

Once our desire for 'something more' is stirred, by God, and we turn to Jesus as the way, can we ever go back? Without the gift of this bread would life ever be a bright?

In calling himself "the bread of life" he gives life, the life that only comes from God. "I am the bread of life," Jesus told them. "Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty.

Our deep yearning will be met. Amen

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