

Bread is Bread

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A small boy- about seven years old, comes down on to the kitchen on a Saturday morning where his mom is putting out his favourite blue bowl and a spoon in front of his place at the table. They exchange smiles and a cheerful good morning, as his mother puts a box of his favourite cereal in front of him. The boy thanks her gravely and sets about the task of first pouring the cereal into his bowl, and then adding just the right amount of milk- enough so that all the cereal will be duly coated, but not so much that there will be a big pool of unused milk at the bottom, when the cereal is finished. Satisfied that equilibrium has been achieved, the boy puts the milk jug down with satisfaction. Then, feeling happy to be alive, happy to be at the breakfast table on a Saturday with his mom, and recalling an action he has seen her do many times before in church, he raises the bowl of cereal high above his head with both hands and declares in a loud thankful voice “The Cheerios of Life”.

It’s a funny story (and a true story) but it serves as an example of the Christian life; an example of which I suspect John’s gospel would approve. Whether or not the language of our Communion service is appropriate in the mouth of a young boy, or at the breakfast table, or directed at a bowl of cereal is really not the point. The fact that this child is open to the *presence* of Jesus at the kitchen table on Saturday morning, *as well as* the church Communion table on Sunday morning, is the point. The fact that this child is able to intuit that Jesus’ presence means *life* is the point.

He certainly did better than the crowds who were fed by Jesus in John's gospel. Our reading this morning comes after that famous picnic, where the makings of a couple of tuna sandwiches ends up feeding what in Canada would be considered a small city, 5000 people. Of course this is a pretty major happening, and everyone starts talking about it, and about their host. It's not like it's the first time the Jews have received miraculous provisions in the wilderness, but this has to rank past Elijah being fed by ravens in the desert. It's definitely right up there-maybe it's even as big as Moses and the manna that fell from the sky during the Exodus wanderings. So then, if this fellow Jesus can do this kind of stuff with a small amount of bread, well he might well be somebody pretty special- a new prophet maybe. While the crowds are talking, at the height of their excitement, Jesus and his disciples slip away quietly, getting into boats and heading for the other side of the lake. The crowds, however, miss the boat, as it turns out, in more ways than one. Not only do they literally miss the boats of Jesus and the disciples, but they miss the boat in terms of understanding the meaning of this incredible experience they have shared with him.

I said that the young boy with his bowl of Cheerios was able to intuit that Jesus' presence means life. This is the boat of meaning that he caught and the crowds with Jesus missed. The crowd is not thinking about how their encounter with Jesus can impact the rest of their lives. They are not thinking about how nothing is now the same, about how the reality of Jesus' life giving presence on that hillside can be a reality always. All they can think about is how to get more bread. Bread is what they expect, bread is what they think they want, and because they are so focused on the gift of the bread and what the bread means, they miss out on the much greater gift of Jesus the Christ, and what he means.

This past week John and I were on Manitoulin Island where I attended a United Church worship conference called Worship Matters. Manitoulin Island is part of Manitou Conference, a part of the world that has a special place in my heart, because it is the area where I was first settled in ministry, and where I found both my husband John, and my dog Ruby. We have friends on the island Steve and Sally, and they were really kind and let us stay with them during the conference. On top of hosting five people- three in their bed and breakfast and the two of us in their home, Sally also made snacks as part of the local Catholic Church's contribution towards hospitality. In fact, when we arrived, the house was filled with the smells of baking- cinnamon and cranberries and icing sugar all just come out of the oven in the form of cranberry biscotti and pumpkin scones that Sally had made for the event- our event. We were treated to samples, and well, to say that they were delicious would be to do them and her, a serious disservice.

Later that evening the phone rang- it was the person who was organising the snacks from St. Bernard's. Working on today's bulletin in the next room, I couldn't help but overhear Sally's half of the conversation with someone who apparently was not getting what she expected. "Well, actually I didn't make muffins, what I've made is pumpkin scones and cranberry biscotti... Oh, well... I guess if you need to have muffins, I guess I can make some." I couldn't believe my ears. After she hung up a hushed conversation with her husband ensued about this muffinless dilemma. When it became clear that Sally was actually going to make a batch of muffins to replace her beautiful biscotti and her superb scones I just couldn't hold my tongue. "Sally" I said "You have already made some wonderful snacks for us, you do NOT need to make muffins." She laughed and said "Well this person on the phone said 'I'm sorry but you said you were going to make muffins, so I really need you to make muffins.'" "Sally" I replied "We get muffins ALL THE

TIME at these things, people will be happy to get something different, especially something as tasty as your biscotti and scones.”

Of course, muffins vs biscotti and scones is not the point. The point is that Sally’s colleague missed the boat, in a similar way to the crowds who followed Jesus. They missed the boat by focusing on what they expected Sally to provide, rather than on what she did provide. What kind of bread she provided makes no difference- bread is bread, the point was that she gave generously of herself, her time her talent her creativity to feed hungry people. There’s still bread, not the bread the other person was expecting, not the bread they might be used to, not the bread they might think they want, but bread that will surely bring pleasure and satisfaction if only it is accepted.

Jesus says to the crowds who are seeking him, who are looking for a sign a la Moses and manna- “I am the bread of life”. There’s still bread. Not the bread you’re expecting, not the bread you think you’re used to, not the bread you think you want, but there is bread- bread that will feed you and strengthen you and satisfy you like nothing else if only you will accept what- if you will accept **who** is being offered to you. And baked into this bread is all the love and forgiveness and dynamic energy of God’s own self. It’s this bread that will brings us closer to God, and God closer to us than we ever could have imagined. Jesus says “I am this bread of life.”

One of the things we did a lot at the Conference was sing, and we sang a lot of songs of the global church. Some of these songs sound different to our ears, some of these songs have rhythms that we don’t normally find in standard north western hymnody. But they have some wonderful ingredients- like rich and varied imagery of God active in the world, a passion for Christ’s love of the poor and dispossessed, a sense of joy and trust in God’s goodness, even in the midst of human suffering. These songs are like

different kinds of bread, not the bread we have come to expect, not the bread we might be used to, not the bread we might think we want, but bread that will nourish us, enliven us and strengthen us as the body of Christ, if only we will accept what is offered. And infused into these songs is a testimony to the love, forgiveness and dynamic energy of the living God as experienced by our brothers and sisters around the world. A perfect example of this is the hymn from Taiwan “The Rice of Life”- a hymn that recognises that for the majority of the world’s population the staple of life is not wheat but rice. That recognition alone is a huge gift to folks like us- reminding us in one image that our common experience is not the common experience everywhere, or even in most places around the world, or even for most Christians around the world. And yet, although the image is different the meaning and message is clearly the same. Verse 3 of this hymn goes

The rice of God for all is meant, no one who comes is turned away.

Believe in Christ whom God has sent, in humble trust, God’s will obey.

Jesus is still the bread of life, even when he’s a bowl of rice.

Today on World Wide Communion Sunday, we affirm both the good news that Jesus is the bread of life for all, and that we can share a rich diet of how that good news is affirmed and expressed. I hope that together we can begin to sample some of these different expressions of the bread of life in our worship life, trusting that God will use them to strengthen the One body of Christ. May God make it truly so. AMEN.