

An Invitation to Eat and Be Eaten
John 6:24-35
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Maybe you've seen one, but I never have. I'm referring, of course, to a bread museum. And if there is one out there somewhere, there is probably not much real bread in it, but more likely plaster or wax replicas. And that is for two reasons, the first being that bread doesn't really keep well for very long, even in the best display case, and also because of the simple, and profoundly theological reason, that bread is for eating, not viewing. Why on earth would you look at bread when you could be tasting it, slathering butter and jam on toast in the morning, or tearing some off and running it through some nice, thick hummus at lunch, or ripping it and dipping it into a goblet of wine at church. Honestly, I don't know how you could make it through the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John without getting hungry with all this talk about bread.

One blogger I read this week expressed his love of bread in theological terms when he wrote this, that, "Bread gets a bad rap. It's the carbohydrate's fault. Our daily bread sustained humanity for centuries, but now, sadly, it has too many "carbs" for our more sedentary ways. Please, dear God, do not give me my daily bread or I shall roll quickly to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. My old breakfast with an "everything" bagel and cream cheese has given way to yogurt and fruit. I order the wrap instead of the bun. I fit my peanut butter on a Triskett. Todd [the

blogger] no longer lives by bread alone, but by every other healthy thing that proceeds from the hand of God.

And then I moved to Northampton and discovered “The Hungry Ghost” bakery. The French Batard will be on the table for my first breakfast with Jesus in Paradise. I hope to be worthy of all eight grains of the multigrain when I meet my Maker. I love to watch them engaged in the holy arts of making bread. Last week I watched two people knead dough, rolling out enough to cover the whole top of a 3’ x 5’ table. Together they lift one end and fold over a thick liquid-y blanket. It is folded until the appointed time. And when it is finished it is laid low in a storage bin, where it will rise again. When I come in to the bakery, I smell the spices used to anoint it, and I see that the oven is empty. I turn to the shelves, daring to hope, and suddenly I see it, the bread of life! And then I know why Jesus said, ‘Whenever you eat this bread, do this in remembrance of me.’ I pray that I could approach the communion table with the same enthusiasm and sense of satisfaction.” Now, that’s how you talk about bread.

Yes, bread is to be eaten, consumed, savored, shared. And that is true, of course, not only of the multitude of variety of bread found in cultures around the world, but also of the very bread of heaven as well. Jesus is not a museum piece. He doesn’t look good in plaster or wax replicas. He doesn’t keep well behind a display case. But he does eat well, as we will find out once again as we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It may just be a metaphor, but Jesus, like

bread, is to be consumed, savored, and shared. “I am the bread of life,” he simply says. And we know what to do with bread.

That shared reality is the basis, of course, of the implicit invitation in tonight’s passage, and the explicit instruction later in the chapter, to eat and drink Jesus, the bread of heaven, the bread of life. In tonight’s passage, Jesus gives meaning to consuming, savoring and sharing himself when he says, in response to the question, “What must we do to perform the works of God,” “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” That’s all you have to do. You don’t have to harvest the grain, take it to the mill, mix it with the yeast, wait for it to rise, put in the oven, or even slice it, all the things you might learn about in a bread museum. You don’t have to do any of that. All you have to do is eat. God takes care of the rest; the master baker makes the perfect loaf.

We haven’t read the whole sixth chapter of John tonight, but if we had, you would have heard how Jesus fed the five thousand with the five loaves and two fish a little boy shared with him. You would have heard how the crowd was not only satisfied, ate “as much as they wanted,” it says, but also that there were twelve baskets left over. This was not like the manna provided for their ancestors, which spoiled before the next day, meant only for the immediate use of their families. No, this bread was to be shared even with those who had not been there, taken on the road with the story of its provision. The ironic thing about the crowd asking Jesus for a sign is that they had just seen one, and a powerful one at that, and yet still

they were not satisfied. It is as if they think they have to go to the bakery to buy it, or get the recipe and go home and make the bread, and have it turn out perfectly, and maybe even put it in a museum, rather than just sitting down at the table with everyone else and simply eating it. “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” Just eat the bread. It sounds easy enough, right? Just eat the bread. But it’s anything but easy, right? “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” Just eat the bread, people. “Sir, give us this bread always.” Just eat the bread, people. We always want to make it more complicated than it really is.

It is tempting to stop right there with Jesus’ invitation to eat the bread of heaven, especially when he has just finished telling the crowds that they don’t need to do any more than that, they God is responsible for preparing the bread, and all they have to do is eat, believe. But reading later on in the chapter, we will hear Jesus telling the disciples that “whoever eats me will live because of me,” indeed “that the one who eats this bread will live forever,” and if there is an implicit invitation to eat the bread in tonight’s passage, there is also an implicit invitation later on to be eaten, because it is in being the bread for others that we find the life of which Jesus speaks, the abundant and eternal life he promises. You see, there’s an easy sermon in this passage, and a hard one. The easy sermon is that God loves you, all you have to do is believe in Jesus Christ, that the bread of heaven is a great metaphor for the spiritual life in Jesus Christ. All you have to do is be willing to

eat. But let's be serious for a moment when talking about hunger and food.

Seriously, there are millions of people in the world, perhaps billions, who wish they could read this passage on even a half-full stomach, who would love to debate the merits of Jesus' symbolism about him being the bread of heaven and us needing nothing else. But they can't. They are too hungry. They need something to eat.

And so, while the easy sermon suggests it is as simple as simply eating the bread of heaven, the harder sermon is the one that suggests that you too are called to be eaten, consumed like the loaves and the fishes just a few verses before this one. It is the one that proceeds from the premise that we are called to be Christ's continuing presence in the world, that if we are doing our job right, people will want to follow us, that they will ask us "When did you come here?" They will ask us for the bread of eternity. We are the body of Christ, the Apostle Paul tells us. Christ's body, like the bread on the table, was broken for us and for the world, and so we too must present our bodies to be broken, in remembrance of him. I was challenged this week by the story of St. Lawrence, one of the early martyrs for the Lord. Tradition has it that he was, more or less, barbecued on a grid iron outside the walls of Rome, and that he died, saying, gruesomely, to his executioners, "I am done on this side; turn me over and eat."

It may not be in such a dramatic fashion as Lawrence, but we are all called to offer ourselves to be eaten by a hungry world, consumed, savored, and shared.

The good news of the Gospel is that whether we give ourselves to be eaten by friends or enemies or strangers, we are never fully consumed; God always provides. Like the loaves and the fishes, we will not run out, and there will extra left over. We do need to be strategic and sustainable, giving the good of ourselves and not the bad, and the first fruits rather than what is left over after we have run ourselves ragged. But we won't disappear from allowing ourselves to be eaten. In fact, we'll find ourselves hungrier and hungrier for the true bread of heaven, Jesus Christ, our true bread to nourish us to be the bread for others, those hungry in mind, body, and spirit. Remember, bread is meant to be eaten. That's its purpose.

As we try to wrap our minds around what it means to be God's bread for a hungry world, let me close with a poem with which I hope God will knead you. It is called Bakerwoman God, and it is by Alla Renee Bozarth, and it goes like this:

Bakerwoman God,
I am your living bread.
Strong, brown, Bakerwoman God,
I am your low, soft and being-shaped loaf.
I am your rising bread, well-kneaded by some divine and knotty pair of
knuckles, by your earth-hands.
I am bread well-kneaded.

Put me in your fire, Bakerwoman God, put me in your own bright fire.

I am warm, warm as you from fire.
I am white and gold, soft and hard, brown and round.
I am so warm from fire.

Break me, Bakerwoman God.
I am broken under your caring Word.
Drop me in your special juice in pieces.

Drop me in your blood.
Drunken me in the great red flood.
Self-giving chalice, swallow me.
My skin shines in the divine wine.
My face is cup-covered and I drown.
I fall up in a red pool
in a gold world
where your sunskin hand is there to catch and hold me.
Bakerwoman God, remake me.

Friends, remember that we are to the world what this table is to us, a foretaste, a glimpse, a shadow of perfection. We too are a sign and seal of grace when our lives are lived sacramentally, as we accept Christ's invitations to both eat and be eaten. Amen.