Bread: Good for our Bodies and Souls

Sermon by Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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Two weeks ago, in the Gospel of John we started Jesus’s long discourse about bread. This discourse lasts about 4 weeks, and it involves Jesus using bread to answer questions about his identity. It started with the feeding of the 5,000. Then last week the bread was a sign from God about Jesus’s identity. Today Jesus says, “I am the bread that came down from heaven”. Next week the discussion centers around eating Jesus’s flesh as he equates his flesh with bread. The Jewish leaders and the crowd will be thinking that Jesus is promoting cannibalism. Jesus’s words were symbolic.

Every culture has some type of bread. Bread as a main food has been around since humans started to farm land and grind grains. Bread is made from whatever grain can be ground. In Ethiopia, injera bread is made from teff flour, an ancient grain. It is very flat like a cracker and has an earthy taste. It is used as a plate and a spoon. In Malawi the bread is called Psima. It is made with corn, water, and oil. It’s more like a dumpling. In western cultures bread is made from wheat and corn. In Jesus’s time, bread was made from barley, rye, and wheat. In Israel they ate matzo bread which was unleavened for the Passover. It had no leavening agent like baking soda, yeast, or a sourdough starter. Flatbread made with fermented rye or barley, was their daily bread.

Jesus talks about bread and eating a lot. This was a part of Jesus’s Jewish heritage. The Jewish people had many festivals. The festivals were a way to remember their losses, liberations, -their history. Most of the festivals revolved around food. We must remember that in ancient times, food was not readily available. In ancient times, people grew and harvested their grain. Then women ground the grain, mixed the dough, and cooked the bread. It took a lot of work to feed a family. One drought, one flood, one fire or a war could cause large groups of people to starve.

When God’s coming kingdom is described in the Old Testament, it always involves a feast. A feast that *we* do not work for-we do not grow, harvest, or cook the food. The food is given and prepared by God. When you work for your food being fed is nice. It is comforting. Jesus was calling himself bread because bread was the main food in ancient times. Jesus saying that he was bread meant that he was God and would feed the people.

It would have signaled God’s coming kingdom. It would have brought comfort, joy and hope. Picture a grand banquet with rich food and wine. Food you do not have to grow or cook or buy. It is prepared for you. You sit and eat. It’s nice to be fed.

Every time we eat, we are extending our life. Food gives our bodies life. When we eat in America in 2024, we are reminded of our abundance of food and of those that work so hard just to have enough to eat.

Bread is symbolic as food to nourish our bodies and as communion to nourish our souls. Communion reminds us that God gave himself for us so that we can live forever in communion with God. It reminds us that God gave life to our bodies and continues to sustain us with food. When we think about communion, bread symbolizes life and wine symbolizes blood or suffering. Wine, we say is Jesus’s blood and it reminds us that life is hard. Jesus suffered and we too suffer.

Jesus is our bread. He is the bread that feeds our bodies and nurtures our souls. Today we break bread together as a sign of our life in God. It symbolizes our commitment to hope for and work for God’s kingdom. Today we celebrate our life together. We feast and share our food as the body of Christ. Amen.