

PROPER FOURTEEN, PENTECOST 11, YEAR B, AUGUST 8, 2021

At the beginning of the pandemic, not only was toilet paper, clorex and paper towels in short supply but yeast was also. I remember going to the store a year ago March wanting to buy yeast so I could make butterfly rolls and was surprised that they were sold out. It turns out that many people had decided to make their own bread at the beginning of the pandemic so the yeast supply became quite limited.

There is something to be said about homemade bread. I don't know about you but I love good homemade bread. There are so many different kinds that are made now that I've even heard of a bread called Austrian Sunflower Bread which boasts different seeds and grains that "yields a golden loaf of complex texture and rich flavor." It is made with white flour, sunflower seeds, cracked wheat, oats, barley, polenta, millet, buckwheat, flax seed, soy grits, sesame seeds, water, malt, sea salt, and yeast." Now that's some bread.

What is your usual bread of choice? It's not hard to imagine that the most popular and most often eaten bread in America is sliced white bread -- that stuff of many air holes, squishy texture, consistent predictable color, and a flavor so bland it is hard to describe. A lot of us probably grew up on it.

We love it. It's the perfect bread for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and toasted, makes a great bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. Perhaps one of the reasons we like it is precisely because it contributes so little to our experience of food. It's tasteless so it doesn't compete with other flavors. There's very little texture so it is easy on the palate; we don't have to work much to eat it and it is predictable in its shape and color and size. But ironically because sliced white bread lacks its own nutrients, vitamins are added for our good health. To top it all off, it has preservatives so that freshness is not a concern and can stay on the shelf for quite a while.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus once again saying, "I am the bread of life." Is Jesus similar to sliced white bread? What kind of bread comes to mind when we hear "I am the bread of life"? Perhaps some will think of pita bread, or brown bread, what we have come to associate with the Last Supper. Yet even that is not what we use in most churches for communion bread. In many Protestant churches that commemorate the Lord's Supper, the bread of choice is the conventional white bread. In churches of the Anglican, Lutheran, and Catholic traditions that celebrate the Eucharist weekly, we often use communion wafers. Is this the "bread of life" to which Jesus likened himself? Many a seminary professor has observed that it is easier to imagine the communion wafer as Christ than to imagine the wafer as bread. The same has been said of our favorite American white bread.

So what are we to make of Jesus' proclamation: "I am the bread of life." Two weeks ago we read the story that has come to be known as the feeding of the five thousand, where many hungry people are fed on very little bread. The focus of this feeding story has traditionally been the miracle of the free meal, with little attention given to the bread itself and what it might signify. In the same way that the focus of the mass feeding has been on the miracle and not the food itself, so, too, with today's proclamation that Jesus is the "bread of life," we usually focus our attention on Jesus rather than on the bread. But how can we begin to understand what he was saying about himself until we look more closely at the bread?

This passage from John's Gospel is a lesson about substance – hearty substance that is filling. It is difficult to associate plain white bread, the mass-produced kind, with a hearty substance that fills you up. It makes a good carrier for other flavors, but by itself, doesn't have much substance. Consider a sampling of other breads and the sorts of breads many of us make at home: Banana nut bread, Ten-grain bread, Rye with caraway seed, Cheddar cheese and jalapeno bread, Blue corn tortillas, Italian loaf, French baguette, roasted garlic bread, Rosemary olive oil bread, Sourdough bread. The list goes on and on.

The breads I just mentioned are filled with nutritious nuts, fruits and other hearty grains. I think we would all agree that our lives -- our families and friends -- are enriched with all sorts of fruits and nuts. You can take that literally or metaphorically. Why not our bread? And to turn that around: When Jesus spoke of himself as bread, as the Bread of Life, is it possible that he was speaking of substance, richness, of texture, of boldness and flavor? That he was inviting us to a greater feast in our life of faith?

Jesus' ministry was built on the rich foundation of many stories of feeding and being fed. Jesus was well-acquainted with the Exodus story, and the tradition that God sustained the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years with manna -- bread -- from heaven. It is in the wilderness of the desert as in the wilderness of our souls that we hunger. The Exodus theme sets up a tension between the manna given from heaven to feed the people in the wilderness and the Eucharistic bread that feeds us in the wilderness of our souls. Somewhere in the midst of that tension we find the bread of life: not manna from heaven that temporarily sustains, but the Bread of Life, the Bread that brings life.

If this vision of bread, a bread that is a hearty substance and is substantial, given us in John's Gospel teaches us something about Jesus, perhaps the first lesson to keep in mind is that Jesus is not simple, not plain, and not undemanding. Jesus is many-textured, multifaceted, and complex in flavor. He calls us to love, to forgive, to encourage, and to get involved. He showed us how to welcome, to persist, and to stand firm. Jesus was tender but he would also get angry over injustices he encountered. He enjoyed meals with his disciples, strangers, the elite, and even the dregs of society. He rebuked the careless. He was harsh with those who had no compassion for the poor, women, children and the disadvantaged. Jesus taught in the temple, healed the sick, challenged the complacent to care, wept over the death of a friend, and told stories. He loved to challenge long held religious beliefs and when confronted he engaged in theological discussions including with women. He drank wine at a wedding. He washed filthy feet. He prayed. When we hear Jesus proclaim, "I am the Bread of Life," we hear all of these things and much more. He is the epitome of the most hearty, substantial and nutritious bread we can feast on.

While searching for the ingredients of Austrian Sunflower Bread a Web site turned up this journal entry, contributed by an American living in Austria. He wrote: "I'm partial to the sunflower seed bread, a dense whole-wheat loaf with a variety of whole grains mixed in. ... When you eat bread here in Austria, you understand why it's so hard to find something that even comes close to good enough back home. Bread in Austria is Food, with a capital F. It's not some spongy filler or a vehicle for a spread; it's a Food with its own merits." He continued, "The other day at a bakery they had just packed up a fresh batch of sunflower bread. When I picked it up, it was still warm. It held the warmth until

we got it home and when I sliced the end off, sunflower seeds scattered across the bread board. I ate my fresh slice with a slab of butter. It was delicious and satisfying.”

So it is with Jesus, the Bread of Life. Just as the manna sustained the Israelites in their journey so too does Jesus desire to sustain us in ours, to be our journeying bread for every road trip, every perilous ride, every long haul, every rocky path. He desires to be our substance and our strength — not in some magical, cure-all way, but in ways that meet us in our real lives, our real challenges, our real fears and griefs and hopes. Because Jesus knows better than anyone that the journey is hard. He knows we need help. He knows we need bread that sustains. His bread. No more white bread. We need the bread that is rich in texture, of bold flavor and nourishing to the world so we can live a life of faith that is an abundant hearty life, filled with abundant living. Jesus is that bread of life. May we eat plentiful of this bread he so freely gives us. Amen.