

“Becoming Bread” by Marjory Zoet Bankson



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Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: John 6:51-58

What a rich season of sermons we've had in this series on becoming bread. First there was the feeding of 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish: a literal miracle of generosity apparently created by a child's good example of sharing what he had. Then there was Elizabeth's sermon on the crowd's demand for more miracles and Jesus' response: *"the bread of God comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,"* and when the people wanted that bread, Jesus told them *"I am the*

bread of life.” **If we were reading the Gospel of John in one sitting**, chapter 6 would move us from literally sharing bread with hungry strangers to Jesus as the symbolic bread of life, to be chewed on and ingested in our daily lives.

Last week we heard from Kevin as he engaged with the member’s commitment here at Seekers. His text from John, chapter 6, said *“Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*

Kevin actually put his own flesh and blood on the bread of Jesus’ presence – at least that’s what I heard in his sermon. As we head into the **recommitment season**, I would encourage YOU to read the commitment statement online (seekerschurch.org) or in *Stalking the Spirit*, and think about how to apply it in your own life as part of your “outward journey” for this next year.

And that brings me to the mysterious text assigned for today from John 6: *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them...And one who eats this bread will live forever.”* Taken literally, it’s no wonder early Christians were sometimes tagged as **cannibals** by suspicious critics. Did they really eat flesh and drink blood?

But when we read chapter 6 as a single narrative, it’s easy to see that the author of John’s gospel is carefully moving from a literal meal to spiritual nourishment that transcends time and space. And remember, even sharing the literal meal was miraculous enough to keep the crowds engaged and wanting more. In fact, we do need to start there, with the feeding of 5,000 people as they sat together on a grassy hillside, because that kind of inclusive gathering with food was unheard of in the stratified society of Jesus’ time. Respectable men didn’t eat in public with sinners, slaves or women, so this whole story is a subversive account of what it meant to follow Jesus. It

tells us that the underlying value of Jesus' ministry is earthly inclusion, not specified beliefs or the heavenly hereafter.

Sharing food as a sign of peace threads through the Bible. In the Hebrew Testament, hospitality to strangers with food was obligatory, and leaving grain at the margins of fields took care of widows and orphans. And in all four New Testament gospels, Jesus and his followers shared food with all kinds of people instead of following the purity codes of the day.

We also remember that "pan" means bread, and com-panion-ship literally means "with bread," so when the crowd of 5,000 shared what they had, they were practicing a different kind of relationship – companionship open to all and not just those who followed the scrupulous rules of temple worship.

It raises the question for me about sharing food as a mark of companionship even today. Think about that. Who do you eat with? How and where does that happen? What does it say about your relationship? And who do you celebrate with? When is eating together an act of solidarity or even worship? Sharing food as a sacred space for relating is one reason why we want Seekers to share a meal before classes in the School for Christian Growth.

And what about those you don't want to eat with? Can you examine resistance? Uncover the "why" when love and connection is absent? How can we let sharing food become a learning place for love – asking ourselves questions about resistance or disease as well as satisfaction and joy?

To stretch this practice of sharing food even farther, some see all food as the **umbilical cord of the earth**, bountiful in some places and shriveled in others. How can we let that possibility shape our lives? Our care for the earth? The environment? Those threatened by hunger right here in our city. That's a sermon for another day.

Our theme for this season is “Grounded in love,” and in her sermon, Elizabeth mentioned that she had never experienced unconditional love. That made me realize that I haven’t experienced unconditional love either – because unconditional love is really an idealized picture, a perfection that we attribute to God. I think human love is always conditional, shaped by our experience and ability to extend toward others. It’s something we have to practice and learn more about. The older I get, the more I realize how limited my ability to love really is – and how grateful I am when people move beyond self-centeredness into generous relationship with me or with others. I’m also glad when I can do that for someone else. Honestly, when I see an unexpected act of kindness or tenderness in a public place, it brings tears to my eyes – and I know I’m on holy ground.

Being “grounded in love” takes me back to the commandment that Jesus gave his disciples later in John’s gospel: to love one another **as I have loved you**. We remember that Jesus had expectations of his disciples. He exposed them to situations they didn’t want to be in. He tested them. He taught them. He challenged them AND he forgave their stupid mistakes, knowing it was a process of learning HOW to love beyond the social patterns they grew up with. Loving one another did NOT mean getting what they wanted, although it did mean getting what they needed. It was all a process of becoming bread and learning to love like that is a lifelong journey.

There are four places in Seekers where I encounter that lifelong challenge from Jesus most often. **The first** is writing or speaking a weekly account of my spiritual life to another Seeker. I do it in mission group, but you can ask Trish about finding a spiritual companion as a step toward being more intentional about your spiritual growth. To articulate my experience and practical cost of loving is the essence of my spiritual reporting. It’s a practice that requires that I find language for what otherwise might be an unconscious process

with many distractions and pitfalls. And sharing the tender edge of how to love is an act of trust that it will be received with respect and kindness, another form of love. As an introvert, reporting is a challenging spiritual practice for me.

I've learned over time that being in a mission group is quite different from being in a support group or on a committee. A support group is there to provide encouragement for something I already want to do. When I was at Faith@Work, I really wanted a support group here at Seekers where I could be more of a recipient than a learner or giver. A committee or task group exists to get something done, so what I bring is my participation to accomplish the task, **not my whole self**. But a mission group is an ongoing constellation of people with an inward intention for spiritual growth and change as well as an outward purpose. It's harder – and more nearly about becoming bread. Learning to love is a lifelong process and a mission group can be a fertile learning lab.

The second place where becoming bread happens for me at Seekers is our monthly practice of communion, when we ritualize this passage of scripture with bread and grape juice as we stand in a circle around this room. It often stirs up tears for me, just to see us standing here together, clothed in our various bodies and troubled stories, each one a stranger in some sense, affirming our place in this chosen family – all of us refugees from some other experience of what love means. We know that loving doesn't always mean getting what you want, but at some level we are hoping to find the spiritual food that we need here.

The third place where I can take a longer look at my soulwork is on silent retreat. Being with people in silence moves beyond the egoic realm of words into the companionship of being bread together – of noticing other things about myself and others that I don't see when we come and go from worship on Sunday mornings. Walking or sitting on the porch at

Dayspring, eating together, sharing a bathroom or hallway with people I don't know well opens another channel of belonging that has woven a fabric of relationship at Seekers that surprises me still. Yes, I am often self-absorbed on silent retreat, but being that way in the presence of others takes all of us to a different level of knowing, being, loving and learning in the silence. Next month, I will be leading our silent retreat on the theme of "Exploring the Inner Journey."

The fourth place of inner work for me will surprise some of you. It's the hour that we are expected to spend "in the chapel" prior to recommitment each year. An hour a year is not much, but it's enough to focus on what it means now – this year – to commit to this particular community, this particular body of Christ. I go over the commitment statement, paying special attention to the Stewards' commitment to care for the whole community and not just the parts that I'm naturally interested in. Then I sit and breathe and pay attention to what's coming up inside. That hour – in this place – is a way of letting the space – chairs, table, cross, lectern, reredos, memories, rituals and the light itself – speak of what it means to belong to Seekers – this network of ephemeral relationships – this yeasty bowl of becoming bread together.

That's the invitation Jesus was holding up for people who only wanted more miracles. By challenging them to eat his flesh and drink his blood, Jesus was inviting them to a level of intimacy we can scarcely imagine, but it wasn't about getting into heaven or getting special favors here on earth. It was about learning how to love one another, conscious of our limitations and hungry for companionship, sharing bread as a first step toward becoming bread ourselves. Learning to love like that is a taste of everlasting life.

May it be so. Amen.