

Peter Bankson: Of One Heart and Soul: The Body of Christ

Seekers Church
A Christian Community

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Peter Bankson

Of One Heart and Soul: The Body of Christ

Summary

The Body of Christ is like a loaf of bread: flour and water and a bit of salt, with perhaps a few nuts or herbs added to spice things up; mixed and kneaded and risen; then baked until it is ready to fulfill its call. We can see that in the community of those who believed Jesus was the Messiah. And where are we Seekers in that process?

Scripture (Acts 4:32-35)

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of their Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Introduction

This morning we will celebrate communion. We will share bread and the fruit of the vine as we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus, and celebrate what it means to us to be part of the Body of Christ. This loaf of bread on the altar table is one of the common symbols of the Body of Christ. "One Bread, One Body, One Lord of all..."

The first lesson for this week, from the Acts of the Apostles, gives us a very vivid image of what that body was like – resilient, compassionate, and ready to share what they had so that none of them were in need.

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As I thought about that description of the early community of faith, I was reminded of a loaf of bread – before it has been baked. We often remind ourselves that we share bread because Jesus shared bread with his friends on that last supper together before his crucifixion. But I don't often think about why Jesus might have chosen bread as the thing to share in the first place. Certainly, sharing bread was part of his tradition, a symbol woven through the story of the Israelites – the unleavened bread of the Passover, the manna in the desert, bread shared as a sign of hospitality. Perhaps Jesus chose to share bread because it was the traditional thing to do.

Virginia Mitchell brought the bread we will share for our celebration this morning. It was made at the [Great Harvest Bakery](#), and given to us by the baker, who has made a

commitment to give free bread for communion to any church that asks. Does that commitment give us any hints about what "Great Harvest" might mean to those who began this chain of bakeries? It is always a treat to go to their bakery near my house. The room is filled with wonderful smells. People are working on the dough, laughing and talking. There is free bread for everyone who comes into the store – not a tiny crumb, but a generous slice, with butter or honey if you prefer. There is an air of enthusiasm and energy, and I feel welcomed and well fed. I'd be pleased to hear that as a description of any church.

As I thought about the bread, and the scripture lessons for this week, and where we are in the life of this small community of faith I found a little lesson: The faith journey of this community is very much like making a loaf of bread.

How many of you have ever made a loaf of bread – from scratch? Good. You can help me keep this lesson on track, I used to make a lot of french bread, but that was before it started hanging around just above my belt. So I may be a little "stale" with my details. As I recall, there are at least six steps in making a loaf of bread: mixing the ingredients, kneading the dough, letting the dough rise, forming the loaf, proofing the loaf, and finally baking the bread.

Mixing the Ingredients

What goes into a loaf of bread? The basic ingredients are flour, water, salt and yeast, but that's not all it takes. Sometimes it makes the bread more interesting if you add different kinds of flour, and perhaps a few nuts, or raisins, or some sunflower seeds.

Lots of different things help make an interesting, nutritious loaf of bread. Lots of different things go into an interesting nourishing community, too. That group of believers who were with Jesus was an interesting mixture – women and men, mothers

and tax collectors and fishermen, and others we never hear about any more. And, as a community, we are a varied mix as well, We're a little too "white bread" to suit the tastes of some, but we have our basic flour, and our salt. Like those early believers, the yeast of our call is working within the community all the time, helping us to grow and change.

How do you make a loaf of bread? First you mix all the ingredients in a big bowl.

What does that look like? A sticky, lumpy mess. When you start, bread doesn't look anything like the finished loaf. The management experts like Steven Covey say you need to start with the end in mind, and I agree. But in the case of bread, as with many kinds of community activity, the early stages of the process don't look anything like the finished product; so we need to try not to judge our progress toward bread by the look and feel of the lump of goo in the bowl. Sometimes that's easier with bread than it is with a new mission group, or a new vision.

If the ingredients aren't well mixed, that's OK, but the process will take longer. Isn't that like a community, as well? Sometimes the rest of the process takes longer if the ingredients aren't well mixed at the beginning. I think that's one reason why we take the time we do when we gather – as a whole community or as a smaller group like a class or a mission group – for sharing our histories and the joys and challenges of our daily lives. It helps mix the ingredients of the community, and makes the next steps go a bit easier. What might the mixing symbolize in the Body of Christ, and how well mixed are we Seekers?

Kneading the Dough

After all the ingredients for bread are mixed in the bowl, you turn the dough out on a flour-covered board, roll up your sleeves, take off your watch and your rings, and get to work.

From what I remember, kneading is the most important part of making a good loaf of bread, and the most work.

When you start to knead the dough, and what happens? At first, it's not easy to work with the dough. You have to keep scraping the sticky dough off the table, adding more dry flour to keep it from sticking again. And you have to keep scraping it off your hands and poking the little pieces back into the lump. Its like the dough would rather do anything else in the world than stick together. It sticks to everything. How many of you have gotten dough stuck to your nose while you were trying to knead a loaf of bread?

And you have to work at it. The dough will never become a loaf unless you really work it over – punching and stretching, and squeezing, even as it sticks to everything.

But, if you keep it up for seven or eight minutes, something really amazing begins to happen. After that much stress and strain, the dough begins to stick to itself! The combination of water and work brings out the gluten in the dough, and it starts to get elastic. It begins to separate from the table and stick to itself. It's that elasticity, that ability to stick together, that helps the bread rise up into a real loaf as the yeast begins to grow throughout the loaf.

After the resurrection, the body of believers was a resilient whole. They had been stretched and squeezed and punched. We call it contention, or wrangling, or tragedy or even persecution when it happens to people, but I think it serves the same purpose. After a while, if the community is to become a real Body of Christ like the bread, the commitment to each other begins to grow, and the community begins to stick together.

From the stories of the early church that we read in the book of Acts, that stick-togetherness was a miracle. That small band of believers was tough, stretchy, and able to stick

together in the face of everything the Roman Empire could throw at them. When I think of them, I see a pizza dough – slapped on the table, pinched and pounded, whirled in the air and stretched almost paper-thin, but still holding together. I don't think Seekers has been kneaded like that. Not yet, anyway. And perhaps, we're missing some of the tenacity that experience releases in well-kneaded dough. But, when I review our process for making decisions within Seekers, I think I see some of that work going on.

Letting the Dough Rise

Even though the kneading is done, the bread is not ready for the oven. It needs time for the yeast to work, time for the dough to rise. The yeast needs time to work, to create the carbon dioxide that makes all those little bubbles in the finished loaf.

So, to make a good loaf of bread, you must set it in a warm, moist place – free from drafts of cold air and wait until it has doubled in bulk. How many of you have come into the kitchen when the bread is rising, out of sight under a damp towel, and seen the towel raised up by the fresh bread growing out of sight beneath it?

The bread is on retreat! It needs this time of quiet, to do the inner work that is needed to grow within itself. Those early followers of Jesus went on retreat as well, although theirs was more like a military retreat. They went underground. They turned their attention inward; caring for one another while the yeasty call grew within them until they were more than double in bulk.

We know the importance of that quiet, rising time, even if most of us don't get as much of it as we would like. We go on retreat; we build quiet time into our lives; we gather in small groups to reflect quietly on where we think we are headed as individuals and as a community.

As we face the decisions before us, we, too, have turned our attention inward. When I look at the results of the financial viability poll we took over the past two weeks, we seem to have risen a lot. About 50 of us have responded to questionnaire so far, offering just over half a million dollars in gifts and loans to support the vision that is growing within us! That feels like the cloth rising in a warm, draft-free place while the aroma of new vision fills the room. But have risen enough? And how will we know?

Over the next several weeks we will test our readiness to move forward. If we seem to be double in bulk, then we will probably be ready to take the next steps on our search for a new place. If not, then it seems like we may need some more time to let the dough rise. I very much want us to be led by the Holy Spirit speaking to us as a community.

This is rather like testing the rising dough by pressing it lightly with your finger to see if it has risen enough. When the dough is ready, it springs back when you take away your finger. If it needs more time, it sits there with a dent in the top.

So, I invite you to be particularly sensitive to those subtle leadings of the Spirit as you reflect on our life together, and come to worship ready to share the highlights of the understandings that have been given to you.

Forming the Loaf

Once the dough has risen enough, it is ready for the next step. What is that? You take it out of the bowl, and knead it again, The bakers call that "punching down the dough!" After all that inner work by the yeast, you punch out all the aromatic bubbles, and make the dough dense again. No, it doesn't seem fair. But, there is no way to form a loaf without doing that, and if it is done thoroughly, the ingredients are mixed again, and the yeast has a chance to work with some new

flour.

That might be what is beginning to happen with the call that Deborah and Kate Amoss and I offered several weeks ago. We've had very excited discussions with some of you, but I have the feeling that we need more, and there are other possibilities beginning to grow, like partnering with Jubilee Enterprises in our new space. We need this "second rising" to let these new calls act like yeast on all of us together.

Proofing

In Seekers, as in bread, timing is critical. If we don't wait long enough, the bread will be dense and tough; if we wait too long, the yeast runs out of food and the loaf collapses. If Seekers does not wait long enough for the call to raise us to the right height, we too may find the process tougher than it should be. But if we wait too long, this vision may run out of food and die.

I once tried to make a batch of bread with dead yeast. It never rose, even after two hours of reflection in a perfect place. So I took it out of the bowl, scattered fresh yeast on the kneading board, kneaded it into the bread, and tried again. It was one of the best loaves I ever made! So even if this vision dies, the future is open – but we can expect a lot more kneading before we're ready to rise again.

Baking the Loaf

This is the transforming part of making bread. Up to now, you can look at the dough – sticky in the bowl, smooth and elastic on the kneading board, or rising as a well-formed loaf – and see in the way it is now something of how it was in the beginning.

Conclusion

Where are we as a church in all this? I'm sure we will see ourselves differently. Some see us ready for the oven. Others are not sure if the yeast is alive in this loaf.

In a moment we will share the bread and the cup, celebrating the good news that we are part of the Body of Christ. Pay attention to the bread this morning. See what ingredients you can still identify, and which ones have lost their identity in the process of becoming part of the whole loaf. Think about where we are as a community – barely mixed, being kneaded, and rising through a time of reflection or ready to be baked.

As you taste the bread, think about those early believers, the ones who had been with Jesus during his Earthly ministry, and the ones who sold their lands and houses to meet the needs of the community.

There **is** a great harvest, ahead of us, a harvest of hope.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul...With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of their Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

May we have the vision, and the courage, and the patience to be the Body of Christ. Amen

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Bread as Body

Bread	Body of Christ (Acts)	Seekers
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Mixing	Flour	People/resources	People/resources
	Water	Love	Compassion
	Salt	Tension	Opposition
	Yeast	Call	Call
Kneading		Jesus' death and resurrection	Making decisions
Letting the dough rise		Reflection	Waiting for the Not Yet
Forming the loaf		Deciding who belonged	Belonging
Proofing		Waiting for the Spirit	Letting the call grow
Baking		Commitment	Commitment