

Peter Bankson: The Bread of Life and the Life of Bread

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Peter Bankson

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The Bread of Life and the Life of Bread

Scripture

Jesus said ... "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:35, 41-51)

Introduction

Last Friday, Marjory and I had the privilege of helping Stephanie Gottlieb and Gene Fischer celebrate their wedding. It was a rich evening, filled with friends and family, food and festivity. There was nourishment and celebration for our spirits as well as our bodies – food for thought, and a celebration of commitment.

During their wedding, Gene and Stephanie made this point by sharing a symbolic meal of bagels and wine. The idea was to make a physical link between a basic reality of nourishing our

bodies (which we know by instinct) and a parallel reality of nourishing our relationships (which we may have trouble seeing clearly.) This was the point: just as our bodies need daily nourishment, so, too, do our relationships.

The bagels reminded all of us that we need nourishment often if we are going to be healthy. And the wine was there to remind us that we do not live by bread alone ... we need times and places to step back, see how far we've come, and celebrate.

This morning, as fresh bread rises on the altar, I want to look at what it means to be the "bread of life." Then I want to spend a few minutes standing the image on its head, sharing some ideas about the "life of bread." The Bread of Life and the Life of Bread.

The Bread of Life: Food for Thought

The Gospel lesson for this week serves up some challenging food for thought. We find Jesus trying to teach a group from his hometown about the need for spiritual food. In today's terms, Jesus has just come off a successful road tour – feeding the 5,000, walking on the Sea of Galilee, healing the sick. Now he is back home, and crowds who have heard about the wonders he has done are looking for him, wanting more. Nevertheless, a group of skeptical neighbors are challenging his authority, opposing his understanding with their logic.

What he has to say is hard to hear, even today: "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh."

What does this mean? How **is** Jesus "the Bread of Life?"

I can see two ways to understand this. First, Jesus teaches us of the need for nourishment for our souls, and second, by his life he gives us some recipes for getting it.

Jesus took care of his inner life. He prayed a lot; he went on retreat, getting away from the crowds; he took time to celebrate with friends like Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Some of these seem to be his "practices," or "disciplines." Others seem to come from unexpected opportunities he saw because of his perspective on life.

He made a practice of praying regularly, and going apart to rest on a regular basis. We encourage those regular practices here, but nourishment does not necessarily come only from solitary activities like prayer and meditation, journaling or reading Scripture. As a community, we gather for overnights and celebration meals at Christmas and Easter. We celebrate special birthdays – and departures – together. Many of us have regular celebrations with mission groups, or people with whom we share history. Marjory and I share a muffin and latte at the Alexandria Pastry Shop every Saturday morning we are in town. Sometimes we see the Lewise and Dick Busch there. Just as we need to eat food regularly, we need regular food for our souls. We dance at weddings!

However, not all the nourishment for our souls comes from planned activities. Sometimes we can "touch Sabbath" for just a moment – in the midst of our busy-ness.

Last Friday, at mid-day, before the wedding, I had a "command performance" at the CIS summer staff picnic. This year we went to "Six Flags over America" in Largo ... a 45-minute drive from the office. I am enough of an introvert that Six Flags is a problem when I am in a big group of friends, and have all day to enjoy being with them. Friday it was worse: I was traveling alone, going late and leaving early; and I did not have time

for the rides.

When I arrived at noon, the parking lot was jammed. There were at least 5,000 screaming, excited kids racing for the entrance gate. They were accompanied by dutiful, sunscreened adults, who were trying to keep the kids in sight in the crowd surging through the gates into a fantasy land filled with rides and noise, and huge soaring machines, and street vendors, and carnival midway booths. It was **exciting!** – However I was not excited.

I was focused on finding our picnic pavilion and spending quality time with the CIS staff. The instruction on my ticket said that I should take the train to the picnic pavilion. However, the train was not running. So I hunted hard, and found the footpath. (It turns out that the picnic pavilions are in a separate part of the park, away from the rides, so you can have the fun of riding the train from where they serve you food for your tummy, and where they offer you the ride of your life!)

Around the first turn on the footpath, the noise level dropped. The path turned again, the trees closed in, and I heard a bird – not a recording of a bird from a speaker disguised as a rock by the path – a **real bird!** The path turned again and I was in a clearing in the forest, with wild blackberry leaping the split rail fence, shrew tunnels in the soft, dry grass, and a cool breeze shaking the leaves. I was alone! I had a fleeting thought that I was lost! I guess everyone else was waiting for them to fix the train.

As I stood in the breeze, a Monarch butterfly came out of the woods. We surprised each other, and both jumped back. I stopped to watch, and a calm settled over me. The butterfly hunted through the space we shared, found a clump of blue cornflowers I had overlooked, and settled down to a quick meal. The door opened to Sabbath. "We're a lot alike," I thought. "We both need to eat 3 or 4 or 5 times a day – and

we'd both rather not eat in a big crowd."

Four or five kids burst around the corner, having a wonderful time. Their celebration ran into my Sabbath. The Monarch left by a secret route. I went around the corner and headed for my picnic with a smile on my face – restored by an unexpected Sabbath moment.

Just as we need nourishment for our bodies – 3 or 4 or 5 times a day, we also need nourishment for our relationships – with family, with community, and with creation.

This is the Bread of Life.

The Life of Bread: A Celebration of Commitment

Yeast is the life of bread – and wine, and beer, and sauerkraut, too – but that is a topic for some other sermon! Without yeast, all bread would be Matzos ... crackers ... knackebrot ...

According to the Joy of Cooking, bread yeast has been helping us stay nourished for the past 6,000 years. The Egyptians were making sourdough bread when Moses took the Israelites into the desert. So it is not surprising that bread – and the yeast that gives it life – is a central image in our faith tradition.

Yeast is a simple, one-celled plant. It reproduces by dividing into two young yeasts ... fast! It feeds on sugar and water, and gives off carbon dioxide and alcohol as it grows. Given the right temperature, water and enough sugar to eat, yeast can reproduce in five minutes or less! According to Joy of Cooking, there are 200 billion yeast cells in an ounce of yeast.

In bread, carbon dioxide makes the bubbles in the dough and

the alcohol evaporates in the oven. In beer or wine, the alcohol preserves the liquid and the carbon dioxide adds a sparkle unless we let it escape into the air. In either case, it is the yeast that gives life to the food that sustains us and focuses our celebration.

Yeast makes the difference between manna and miracles. When his neighbors wondered how Jesus could say he would "come down from Heaven," he reminded them that even though God had saved their ancestors in the wilderness with manna, eventually they had died. Nevertheless, he suggested, he had been given a different recipe, a yeasty recipe, a recipe of call and commitment.

That reminds me of the old illustration of the difference between involvement and commitment – the one about the chicken and the pig. It goes like this: "Do you know the difference between involvement and commitment? In a breakfast of bacon and eggs, the chicken is involved, but the pig is committed." The yeast is committed to the bread.

There are probably one and a half trillion yeast plants in this vase of rising dough. They are dividing into new plants once every 10 minutes. Each one of them is living out it's life, making the gas that helps the bread rise. When I bake this dough later today, and take the bread out of the oven, every one of these yeast plants will be dead. However, we do not mourn the death of the yeast: That is what this yeast is called to do. That is at the core of commitment.

These yeast plants will be dead, but "yeast" will be alive, ready and waiting to help us make bread – or wine – whenever we want. Given the right environment, one yeast plant, one "200 billionth of an ounce" can get the whole thing going again.

When Jesus spoke of offering his body as the bread of life, I see that same commitment. We hear it all over the Gospels –

you must lose your life in order to find it. Moreover, the Holy Spirit – the yeast of our faith – will live on, in all those who respond to the call of the risen Christ. The good news in Christ is that meaning and purpose grow out of commitment.

That is what I hear when Jesus says: "No-one comes to God, except through me." (Or, "I've been given the understanding that living forever means living fully **now**, as you are called by God.")

That celebration of commitment **is** good news. To be responding to God's call is to be doing what makes your heart sing. It may look like a heavy burden, or a minor job to others, but if it is call, it will be a delight to you.

Last time I offered the word in worship I suggested that something might just be a call for you if, when you are in the midst of it, you forget to eat. I have touched that place a time or two recently. I have been there at work, figuring out the details of a complex plan for helping local leaders in rural communities help kids. I often get there when I am preparing the prayers I offer on those Sundays when I serve as liturgist. I touched that place two weeks ago as I walked the labyrinth at a retreat in Santa Barbara.

Yeast is the Life of Bread. In Mexico, they call loaves of rising bread "almas" or "spirits," because of the way they move and grow by their inner power. That speaks of yeast as the life of bread! Every loaf of bread baked costs the life of the yeast that made it rise, but the yeast lives on.

This is a model for those of us who are on the path out of the amusement park. It can be the Monarch who shows us where the flowers are – hidden beside the path. The life of bread – and the life of relationships and community – and the life of creation, for that matter, is a celebration of commitment.

Conclusion

Watching that dough rise up against gravity gives me a sense that when we're awake, and connected to others – and as we learn how to tap that wellspring of energy and creativity that Jesus was talking about with his neighbors – then, somehow, we're on a path into the forest that goes way beyond the picnic grove. It may be the path to a life that lasts forever – if not for this little yeast, then for the creation and awareness of which we are a conscious part.

The Bread of Life – food for thought about eternity

The Life of Bread – a celebration of commitment

AMEN.