

"Take this Bread" by Aeren Martinez

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this
by

Matinicus Island, Maine
Two square miles of God's delightful diversity
Cover Image by Peter Berkman



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No doubt many of you are looking at this altar today and wondering what did I miss? Why are we having communion today? The answer to that will become clear by the end of my sermon.

For the past month or so the readings have been dominated by a theme of "the bread of life." I was excited about that theme because I've been reading a book called, "Take This Bread". In it, Sara Miles writes, "Mine is a personal story of an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert: a blue state secular intellectual; a lesbian; a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism."

Sara lived her life as a mother, restaurant cook and writer. Then early one morning, for no earthly reason, she wandered into a church. She writes, "I was certainly not interested in

becoming a Christian, or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut." But she ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine, and found herself radically transformed.

If all she did was become a convert, it would be a mildly interesting book, but her story is more than a spiritual memoir, it is a call to action. I'll talk more about Sara later.

This week's readings however, take a different turn. In its simplest form it is a theme of legalism versus love and from that perspective it is a struggle to assert power over the powerless. The Pharisees had the rules – as they interpreted them. You people need to obey these rules, being in violation of the rules makes you "unclean" and therefore unworthy.

But Jesus doesn't take the bait; he throws it back in their face. He calls them hypocrites and quotes Isaiah as he does so: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

I have a confession to make here. I've been very guilty in the past of being one of those legalistic people. In the military, I read volumes of rule and regulations and liked the black and white clarity of the rules. Gray areas confused me and scared me a little, but I came to realize that being a leader, being an officer meant interpreting the rules, not just enforcing them. In interpreting the rules, you have latitude to go with the spirit of the law and not the letter of the law. So while the rule was that all soldiers had to report for drill training on a certain weekend I had the latitude to give an alternative training day to a soldier whose wife just had a baby, or take into consideration an outstanding soldier who's never missed a drill and really wants to go on vacation with her family that weekend. The Pharisees didn't get that, they used rules as hammers and sickles pounding down the people who

dared to ask questions that might challenge them and cutting down people who were not obedient to the rules of God.

The sad thing is that in today's society we see Christians doing the same thing. THE BIBLE SAYS... are the scariest words I know, for in looking to use the bible for black and white clarity you miss the rainbow of color intended by Jesus Christ when he said the greatest commandment is to love. Oh sure there are other words with the word LOVE, but it really boils down to that one four letter word. Love your God as yourself, love your neighbor, love your enemy, love up, love down, love forward, and love back. For if you practice love you find it very hard to let that other four letter word into your heart...hate. Mother Theresa once said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them. " Today's Pharisees fall into the same trap of legalism as the Pharisees of old. They judge before they assess the situation, they do not pay heed to James when he wrote, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." There is little physical comfort in the pages of a book, or the rules of law, but in loving and showing compassion your heart is lifted and your soul is fed.

That brings me back around to Sara Miles. What makes an avowed secular skeptic suddenly turn to religion? She says that. "When I left the home of my atheist parents, I had no reason to think I was looking for God: I just knew I wanted to experience meaning and connection. The material world was my ground: bodily experience the context in which I searched for knowledge and love, political and moral purpose..." This quest took her to stifling heat in restaurant kitchens, revolutions, war zones, in engaged journalism and passionate politics. All the while she thought it was all secular and unbeknown to her, God had put her on a path of spiritual enlightenment as she was experiencing the world. The impulse to share food, "she notes "is basic and ancient, it's no wonder the old [biblical]

stories teach that what you give to a stranger, you give to God.” The people she met offered her food and through that food she later came to realize that the offering and accepting of that food was a form of communion. As I read Sara’s book I also came to realize that food was a core part of my life. How often had I mentioned in the mission support group that I felt like preparing and providing a meal was sacred? Or that I’d like to use my cooking skills in some type of mission?

The beauty of Christianity, Sara observes, is that it “offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same... **without exception, all people are one body: God’s**” She became fully immersed in the life of St Gregory’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco, became a deacon and started a food pantry where all were welcomed at the table of God. Her success brought her unexpected gifts that she used to start other pantries and food programs throughout the poorest sections of San Francisco. “I’m hardly the person George Bush had in mind to be running a faith based charity.”

Sara’s vision was one of feeding the hungry by creating a church food pantry “service” where everyone would be welcome. No checking IDs, no requirement for living in the neighborhood, no limiting the number of people in a household; just show up, stand in line and get your groceries at the altar. She met a lot of resistance after presenting the idea to the parish staff. One concerned staff member called her afterwards to say, “Well, we discussed the food pantry idea after you left, and I’d say the reactions basically ranged from ‘Over my dead body’ to ‘When hell freezes over’” Sara took it all in stride, she worked through the objections, combating legalism with love until she finally opened the program, well that’s not quite right she doesn’t like it called program, mission, or ministry. Once a visiting minister gave her a compliment about her “wonderful food program, Sara quickly corrected him and said, ‘It’s not a program, it’s a

community of prayer.'”

As Jeannine and I discussed the book we both agreed that what we found most compelling was Sara’s realization that this is the way Jesus would want it to be, **no barriers**. This was a church for all: broken and whole, pious and irreverent, rich and poor. I imagine it’s like opening a puzzle box and finding all these pieces where no two are exactly the same, yet fitted together they make a divine picture... a beautiful communion of misfits. Church should be where the needs of people are met and in doing so it glorifies God.

Seekers Church is like that for me. I came here with real needs and I can tell you they were met. Jeannine and I both needed a place that helped us define our individual calls, and helped us clarify our individual and collective spiritual visions. I came here with a lot of spiritual baggage I was still working through. In mission groups and classes I made friends, spiritual companions, and an extended family I will keep close to my heart for the rest of my life. Jeannine came from quite a different perspective feeling like she needed to figure out more about prayer life and help in focusing and clarifying her talents.

Sara found community through communion; she translated sharing food as a real life manifestation of communion. Like Sara, I find communion a deeply moving spiritually intimate act. It is one of the most personal things you can do in church, sans foot washing on Maundy Thursday.

This is why we are having communion today, so I can share with you one more time the intimacy of having communion with you my chosen community.

I close with this prayer written by Sara Miles for the volunteers to sing at the food pantry:

Oh God of abundance, you feed us every day.

Rise in us now, make us into your bread,

That we may share you're your gifts with a hungry world,

And join in love with all people, through Jesus Christ... Amen