

Pentecost Proper 14B, 8/9/15  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2 & John 6:35, 41-51  
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We are treated to another of Jesus' rich metaphors this morning: "I am the bread of life." Not the first time we've heard it recently as four Sundays in August are known among church professionals as "the bread Sundays" from John's gospel. Following the feeding of 5,000 with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, Jesus gives a long discourse on bread. He is like a baker kneading a huge mound of dough. And why not use bread? Bread is a great metaphor. It's a familiar, daily staple for people in every culture. It appears in countless Bible stories - all of which Jesus and his listeners, as observant Jews, would know. Abraham offers bread to 3 strangers who come to his tent with news that God will grant them a son, Isaac, in their old age. Bread is part of Jacob's tempting offering to his twin, Esau, whose hunger causes Esau to give over his share of the inheritance. Unleavened bread is on the list of food gathered in haste as the Hebrew slaves flee Pharaoh. A kind of bread called "manna" is God's gift to them as they become a people in the wilderness. Bread is used to seal covenants. Bread is placed on the table in the ark as the sign of God's presence first in the desert and then later in the temple. It is an omen of disaster in Gideon's dream and fed to Elijah by ravens. Jesus uses making bread in one of his parables and most certainly he was served some whenever he ate with prostitutes or pharisees or simply reached into his own bag along the road.

Bread is on the menu for his last meal with his disciples and in resurrection appearances at Emmaus and on the lake shore. Given bread's aroma in scripture, it isn't surprising Jesus would return to this image. Like carbs in a marathon runner's muscles on the eve of the race, Jesus must have carried bread in his body! When he says, "I am the bread of life", he offers a big piece to chew on. Add the fact that Jesus is speaking in John's gospel, the king of metaphors, and the weight of his words tips the scale even further down. But, the scale goes lower when Jesus pulls manna out of the bread basket and he has them asking - what's wrong with manna? Our ancestors were pretty grateful to gather that bland, hoarfrost stuff every morning. As newly-escaped slaves, they weren't used to trusting leaders - human or heavenly. Moses was a wanted murderer. Now he has royally angered Pharaoh by inciting the pyramid labor force to flee with him. You can't blame those dependent bricklayers for not trusting Moses' God by whatever name Moses uses. Obviously, at this time, God's people are desperate for more than daily sustenance. They need to learn trust in God, the One God, the great "I AM" and manna from heaven was one way to learn trust.

Now centuries later, this Jesus from Nazareth comes into town talking about bread, but being clear that it's not about manna. He's talking about more than trusting in God and being a grateful receiver of God's grace and gifts - as wonderful and important as those are. Jesus has different bread on his heart.

His bread of life has an added ingredient to the unleavened bread quickly shoved into the slaves' bags after the angel of death passed over their houses. There is an added ingredient to the manna if we take seriously his parable about the woman making bread. Jesus is offering yeast bread because, like the metaphor of bread itself, yeast offers its own frothy brew. Anyone interested in following Jesus might want to think about yeast. A granule may be only one round cell in an 8-shaped form, but when it interacts with liquid, there's more than the power of one! It's alive! It bubbles! It smells and, best of all, it transforms everything around it. Nothing stays the same. Flour becomes bread. And how it works is amazing. Once yeast dissolves, you can't distinguish it. You can't lift out a granule and hold it up. It's now part of the whole, making all around it rise to their best. So, yeast can't say, "I'm here" and "flour is there". It's all bread. And yeast is committed. That's why putting in yeast is an intentional act. Once it's in there, it can't be "taken back". It can be slowed and even killed, but left alone, yeast will do its work. Yeast doesn't hold back and wait to see, judging what kind of flour is being used or what kind of bread might be the outcome. Yeast just gives itself away, trusting in the process, surrendering to the unfolding unknown. Mystery and darkness are part of yeast's power.

Jesus is looking for yeast, probably because yeast is like love. Yeast makes a bread that's more than just trusting God as with the manna in the wilderness. The kind of bread Jesus is invites us to work with God, intentionally creating space for love in our hearts and lives. Jesus' bread increases our capacity, as in Ephesians, to "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." That's a mouthful of "love bread" to chew on and it's daily bread, isn't. So, we have lots of opportunities to kill the yeast. I did it just this week - at least once! A granddaughter's "lack of planning" inconvenienced me, her chauffeur, and I launched into a string of words so important to me that I didn't stop speaking them when she admitted her error and apologized. My hot anger killed off some yeast in that moment.

Yet, there are times when we let Jesus' yeasty love work in us and that should happen at a wedding, right? But what if the mother of the groom arrives

bedecked in a lovely dress but, inside, she is critical and distrusting of her son's choice. "I am the bread of life", Jesus says, and without even a granule of actual yeast in the wedding cake, love opens space in her hardened, hurting heart so her eyes and ears see and hear. She allows her son "to grow" - and herself as well. Love and acceptance filled her heart.

As God shows us in Jesus' life and death, God only needs a small granule of love and our openness for the alive, explosive power of kindness, tenderness and forgiveness to rise up the most holy already in us. Or in the words of a Rumi poem:

Love is recklessness, not reason.  
Reason seeks a profit,  
Love comes on strong, consuming herself,  
Unabashed.

Yet in the midst of suffering  
Love proceeds like a millstone,  
Hard-surfaced and straight-forward.

Having died to self-interest,  
She risks everything and asks for nothing.  
Love gambles away every gift God bestows.

Amen.