

Wonder Bread: The Miracle Diet
Reflection on John 6: 24-35
By Emily Bamforth (LLWL, Chinook Presbytery)

“Give us this day, our daily bread...”

This line from the Lord’s Prayer is so familiar to most of us that we could recite it in our sleep. We may even have given a passing thought to what the line meant, and had some vague notion that the reference was not exclusively to bread, but to the sustenance we need to survive each day. I know I usually left it at that. That is, until I read this morning’s passage from the Gospel of John more closely. There is more to bread than meets the eye.

The Gospel reading we heard this morning follows closely after the ‘Miracle of the Loaves and the Fishes’. This is the well-known and well-loved story in Jesus ministry in which five loaves and two fish miraculously become a feast for hundreds. In this story, what intrigues me most is not the ‘manna from heaven’ angle, but rather the unnamed boy who offers up his own food to feed the people who have gathered. Remember, the Middle East two thousand years ago was a very different world from today. Food scarcity was a major issue, thanks to unpredictable droughts, insect plagues, lack of preservation methods and high taxation. Without the social networks we have in place today, death from starvation was common place. To willingly share food with complete strangers was to run the serious risk of not being able to feed yourself or your family. And yet this mysterious boy offers up what he has; five barely loaves and two small fishes. He must have known there couldn’t have been enough to go around, and yet he offers them all the same. I wonder now if the ‘miracle’ of this story was not that the food mysteriously multiplied, but that the food was shared so willingly and amicably.

In fact, the crowd enjoys the impromptu feast so much that they don’t notice when Jesus and his Disciples depart the scene. Sadly, when the crowd catches up to them, they have missed the spectacle of Jesus walking on water. However, Jesus is still there to impart his wisdom. When the multitudes had gathered about him again, Jesus delivers one of the great ‘I am’ statements, so famous in the Gospel of John. “I am the Bread of Life,” he proclaims, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” In his explanation, Jesus draws a distinction between the ‘bread that

perishes' (in the context of the story, bread is an analogue for all food), and the spiritual nourishment that God's love provides, which is eternal.

When I began to think about this passage, I realized for the first time that there is indeed a duality of the line in the Lord's Prayer which reads, "Give us this day our daily bread." 'Daily bread' refers not only to the food we eat to fuel our bodies, but also to the ideas and experiences that fuel our minds, our souls and our interactions with others. That duality is a true today as it was then, and is perhaps even more complicated and thought-provoking.

**

In 2014, my parents retired after more than 30 years of working in and teaching medicine, my Mum as a medical biochemist and my Dad as a human geneticist. One of the many joys they rediscovered in their retirement was gardening. With plenty of love and care (and without me, my three siblings, and our menagerie of animals to foil their vegetable patch attempts), their little backyard garden in Edmonton grew to be a wonderful botanical extravaganza. To the delight of the rest of my family, much of it is edible. The last time I was home, I made myself a salad from the bounty; gathering baby kale and swiss chard from the vegetable trugs, snipping aromatic basil and mint and summer savoury from the neatly planted herb garden, plucking tiny tomatoes and plump beans, still dripping with summer rain, from their vines. I chopped a few small, fragrant strawberries from the little strawberry plant and put those in, and then sprinkled on freshly-made feta cheese and artisan balsamic vinegar, purchased that afternoon from the local Farmer Market.

Mmm. Manna from Heaven.

Or... is that Manna from Earth?

Many people today (and I freely admit I fall into this category sometimes) are removed from the food they eat. Thanks to the 'Convenience Food Revolution' of the 50s and 60s, it is now easier than ever to open a can of beans, pull out a frozen pizza, or stop by the A & W Drive-Thru, without once thinking of the connection that food has to the Earth. How often do we consider

how unnatural it is to eat strawberries from California in December, or bananas from Costa Rica in October, or apples from New Zealand in July? I don't mean to imply that this is not 'bad' in any sense (who doesn't love chocolate-covered strawberries at a Christmas party?), but it does drive a wedge of confusion into modern society's understanding of where food comes from.

One thing I believe most people would agree with is that food tastes better when it is homemade or homegrown, or purchased directly from the people who produce it. Strawberries so fresh they still radiate the summer sunshine taste better than those in Styrofoam baskets shipped from California. Bread still moist and warm from the oven is far more satisfying than pre-sliced loaves in plastic bags from the grocery shelf. Herbs freshly plucked from the herb garden explode with flavour in a way that dried, jarred ones do not.

And it is not just the food itself that is different when it comes from closer to its source; the pleasure and experience of eating comes also from the preparation. At the most revered dining establishments, chefs experiment with local flavours as an artist experiments with colour, expertly crafting magnificent dishes that he or she is excited to share with diners. This is far different from a mass-produced chicken burger that slides down a chute, to be plunged into a paper bag by a server who may themselves hate chicken.

It seems that the closer food is to the Earth, the more we can connect our senses, and indeed ourselves, to it. The food that we loving grow or raise or prepare for others is special as well. Although I did not inherit my Dad's culinary genius, I do love to bake. I experience a little moment of joy when a friend or co-worker takes the first bite of a cookie or cake and exclaims, "Mmm... this is wonderful!" The joy and satisfaction of *sharing* food is also something we sometimes lose sight of in our busy modern lives.

Then there is that other kind of food referred to in the scripture; the 'food' that we feed our minds and our spirits. I would argue that we have also started to separate ourselves from the source of many of our social experiences. I am personally a fan of social media. I think it is a wonderful way to share the pain and joy of living. It can be a powerful tool to connect and work with people

in novel ways, and to share ideas in constructive ways. However, if not used with caution, social media can separate or isolate us from one another.

In the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures we heard this morning, the Prophet Nathan rebukes King David after his scandalous affair with Bathsheba. In David's day, to commit adultery at all was a terrible sin, but it was usually blamed on the woman. What might shock us today about the story is how David deals with the husband, Uriah. Instead of facing up to the man, he uses his power to ensure that Uriah, a soldier, is sent to the forefront of the fighting where David knows he will be killed. In this way, he abuses his power and uses his influence a shroud of anonymity which he can hide behind.

Fast-forward to 2018, and it is sometimes easy to forget, when looking at a computer screen, that the person on the other end is a real person. I have frequently seen people express themselves on social media in a way I don't believe they would ever do in a face-to-face conversation. The anonymity of the Internet provides a shroud to hide behind. Additionally, the lack of visual clues and body language drives a wedge of confusion into society's understanding of how to be compassionate and sometimes even civil. To counter these kinds of exchanges, it is important to be able to distinguish them from the 'real world' interactions that ground us in our relationships with one another. Connecting ourselves to each other the way that we connect our food to the Earth is one way to live more authentically.

Personally, I remind myself to cherish those 'fresh from the garden' experiences, like taking a walk with a friend or spending time with my nieces and nephew. When I'm out hiking in my favourite places with my dog, I leave my iPhone behind. I want to grow the seeds of wonder and awe in Creation, without the interference of a digital word that ever craves attention. I want to be at peace and to listen closely for the still, small voice of God that is, for me, the Bread of Life.

**

Manna from Heaven is not the heavenly food that angels eat. It is the food that we share with the Earth, the nourishment that our hands and the hands of our loved ones pull from the soil, nurtured

by the sun and the rain. It is the food that we love and take pride in, the food that brings us fulfillment and a connection to Creation. It is the food that we share with one another; the food that provides more than physical nourishment. It is the food that memories are made of.

The Bread of Life is not some ethereal, unattainable entity. It is the connection and interactions we have to the people in our lives; those we love and those we don't get along with. The Bread of Life is the nourishment we attain when we are compassionate and forgiving, when we are curious and seek inspiration, when we are open and willing to learn. It is all those things which we encounter in our lives that bring us closer to God.

Our Daily Bread is precious. Give thanks, and share it.

To God be the Glory.

Amen.