

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

A bakery that made a rich, dense bread they call Sunflower Bread, described their bread this way in an advertisement: “Sunflower Bread, our healthiest loaf, is hearty and moist, keeps well despite a lack of any oil or butter. Made with white flour, sunflower seeds, cracked wheat, oats, barley, polenta, millet, buckwheat, flax seed, soy grits, sesame seeds, water, malt, sea salt, and yeast.”

This is the sort of bread meant by Jesus’ claim: “I am the bread of life.” Certainly the follow-on claim: “Those who come to me shall not hunger,” has much texture to it when such a bread is considered.

Even in the absence of a market survey, it’s reasonable to imagine that the most popular and most often eaten bread in Canada is sliced white bread, that stuff of many air holes, squishy texture, consistent predictable color, and a flavor so bland it is hard to describe.

We love it. It’s the perfect platform for peanut butter and jelly, and toasted, makes a good bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich.

One of the reasons we like it is precisely because it contributes so little to our experience of food. Tasteless, it doesn’t compete with other flavours. Of little texture, it is easy on the palate; we don’t have to work much to eat it. Predictable in its shape and color and size, sliced white bread is portion-controlled. Lacking in its own nutrients, vitamins are added for our good health.

Mass produced and prominent in our grocery stores, it is the

best price we can get. To top it all off, it has preservatives so that freshness is not so much a concern.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. Is Jesus similar to sliced white bread? What kind of bread comes to mind when we hear “I am the bread of life”? Perhaps some will think of pita bread, the bread that we have come to associate with the Last Supper.

Yet, even that is not what we use in most churches for communion bread, probably because of “convenience,” which some of us have named “tradition.” In the Protestant churches that commemorate the Lord’s Supper, the bread of choice is the conventional white bread, or more recently, whole wheat. In churches of the Anglican, Lutheran, and Catholic traditions, we often use communion wafers. Is this the “bread of life” to which Jesus likened himself? Many a seminary professor has observed that it is easier to imagine the communion wafer as Christ than to imagine the wafer as bread. The same has been said of our favourite Canadian white bread.

Today’s Gospel reading begins with Jesus’ proclamation: “I am the bread of life.” A few weeks ago, we read the story that has come to be known as the feeding of the five thousand, wherein many hungry people are fed on very little bread. The focus of this feeding story has traditionally been the miracle of the free meal, with little attention given to the bread itself and what it might signify. In the same way that the focus of the mass feeding has been on the miracle and not the food itself, so, too, with today’s proclamation that Jesus is the “bread of life,” we usually focus our attention on Jesus, rather than on the bread.

But how can we begin to understand what He was saying about Himself until we look more closely at the bread?

This passage from John’s Gospel is a lesson about abundance. It is difficult to associate plain white bread, the mass-produced

kind, with abundance. It makes a good carrier for other flavors, but by itself, doesn't have much "tooth." Consider a sampling of breads from smaller bakeries, and the sorts of breads many of us make at home: Banana bread, Multi-grain bread, Molasses and Raisin bread, and Whole Wheat bread. Our lives, our families and friends, are enriched with fruits and nuts. Why not our bread? And to turn that around: When Jesus spoke of Himself as bread, as the Bread of Life, is it possible that He was speaking of richness, of texture, of boldness and flavour, that He was inviting us to a greater feast in our life of faith?

Jesus' ministry was built on the rich foundation of many stories of feeding and being fed. Jesus was well-acquainted with the Exodus story, and would have known the tradition that the Lord God sustained the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years with manna, bread, from heaven. It is in the wilderness of the desert, as in the wilderness of our souls that we hunger. The Exodus theme is spread throughout John's Gospel, setting up a tension between the manna given from heaven to feed the people in the wilderness, and the Eucharistic bread that feeds us in the wilderness of our souls. Somewhere in the midst of that tension, we find the bread of life: not manna from God, not the flesh of Christ, but the Bread of Life, the Bread that brings life.

If this vision of bread given us in John's Gospel teaches us something about Jesus, perhaps the first lesson to keep in mind is that Jesus is not simple, not plain, not undemanding. Our Lord has many textures and complex flavours. He calls us to love, to forgive, to encourage, and to get involved. He showed us how to welcome, to persist, and to stand firm. Our Lord was tender, He enjoyed meals with strangers and disciples, He rebuked the careless. Jesus taught in the temple, raised the dead to life, challenged the smug to care, wept over the death of a

friend, and told stories. He drank wine at a wedding. He washed filthy feet. He prayed.

When we hear Jesus proclaim, “I am the Bread of Life,” let us hear all of these things and many more. And as we live our lives and live our faith, let us be rich in texture, of bold flavour, and nourishing to the world. No more white bread in our love of God, but abundant life, abundant living, abundant faith.

When we were growing up, we looked forward to fresh homemade bread right out of the oven. We couldn’t wait to get a thick slice while it was still warm, with a slab of butter, not margarine, real butter, possibly with homemade jam as well, on it. It was delicious and satisfying.

So it is with our Lord, the Bread of Life. That is the way it should be with our life of faith: delicious and satisfying.

AMEN.