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## **Bread More Than Bread, Wine More Than Wine**

Old Testament: Leviticus 24:5-9; Psalm 24 (particularly 1-4, 7-10)

New Testament: Mark 2:23-27

When I was a child, I endured a great hardship that I know many of you children and young people around here are also subjected to: I could not get my parents out of the church on Sundays. My church service started at 11am, and was over at 12 (which, as we all know, is lunch time). And it wasn't like it is around here, where you can go play in the gym and maybe buy a little something from the candy machine. Those were actually two issues us kids of the 70's dealt with, directly related to the grown-ups' endless, pointless gabbing after church. For me, the first was boredom. A lot of the other kids got to go home, so as my parents stayed longer and longer, it was more and more difficult to find something to occupy my time. I distinctly remember one time when my mother came out of the church to find me 20 feet up the side of the building, clinging to half an inch of brick with toes and fingers, and cheerfully waving down to her. That really should have taught her to get out more quickly, but alas, it was fruitless. The second issue was even more pressing: hunger. Now, I was raised in church, and I could find a vanilla wafer when I wanted one. But once a month I was tempted by the siren call of a food item that was high on my list of favorites—bread. Now, this was the South, in a Baptist church, in the 70's. We used grape juice for wine (and one memorable time, used grape kool aid) and we had not even heard of Matza crackers, nor did we have any concept of the appropriate theology connected with them. Frankly, we hadn't even heard of bagels in Richmond, VA in the 70's. So, once a month, my mother and the other women of the church cut up into tiny cubes the staff of life: Wonder Bread. Soft, white, lovely Wonder Bread (which builds strong bones in 12 ways). On many communion Sundays, knowing that I was doing something HORRIBLY wrong and DEEPLY sinful, I would sneak back into the sanctuary while the adults jabbered on out in the vestibule. I would go over to the communion plates and lift up the lid. I would grab a huge handful of those beautiful, white cubes and wad them into a ball, then retreat happily to some uninhabited room and munch merrily on my ball o' bread.

Now, while my understanding of the greater truths of theology was child-like and sketchy at best, I did have some sense of the sacred and I believed, the way kids believe in things that adults tell them are so but cannot fully understand, that my parents would be horrified to find that I was eating communion bread to appease my hunger. I actually only told them that I had done this last week. I knew that they believed that bread to be more than just bread—why cut it in cubes if it wasn't really, really important? Why not put some peanut butter and jelly on it, make it a meal? Well, as I grew up and became more sophisticated in my faith, a funny thing happened to my understanding of that bread. By the time I was truly an adult and able to think logically about the meaning of communion, I decided that the ritual of sharing the bread and the wine was just a symbol and it lost all of its mystery for me, all of its sense of being something beyond the normal—sacred, in fact. I was proud of the fact that as someone with a great deal of higher education in literature, I understood symbolism. I could scoff at those who didn't get it—who wanted there to be something miraculous in this observation of the Lord's supper. Didn't they understand symbols? Does everything need to be a magic act?

Then I began to take a closer look at Jesus. I began to take note of several things about Jesus: 1) Jesus was a relatively practical guy and was not a show-off. Moses had that whole parting of the sea thing, which was so spectacular that it was several millennia before it could be recreated by Cecile B. DeMille, even on film. Many of those prophets were pretty showy, too—carrying yokes into town and

challenging prophets of Ba'al to fire battles. But Jesus is not. His miracles are largely practical—his mother said they needed more wine, so he got her some; people were sick or injured and he healed them; people were hungry and he gave them food. The flashiest miracles he offers are the ones he did only for his 12 disciples—walking on water, talking with Moses and Elijah. This verse in Mark addresses his practicality—“Look,” he says, “people are hungry on the Sabbath. Is it more important to follow Sabbath rules or to feed hungry people?” He proves he knows his scripture, too, by quoting the event where David takes the bread meant for the priests when his troops are hungry. He asks a similar question when the Pharisees question him for healing on the Sabbath—“Should people be in pain because the rules say so? Is taking care of a sick person less important than following Sabbath rules?”

2) At the same time, Jesus has a deeper sense of connection to the sacred, of respect for and understanding of the sacred than anyone before or since. He says, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well...I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” (John 14: 7 & 11). When he takes those disciples into that upper room the night before his betrayal, it is with a searing understanding of their need for a sacred time together. It is a holy moment when he says to them “This bread is my body—eat of it. This wine is my blood, drink of it.”

We've all heard the phrase “You are what you eat,” haven't we? We know what that means. It means if you make a steady diet of Big Macs and Twinkies your body will be fed with fat and chemicals so that you will gain weight and have a shelf life of twenty-thirty years. If, on the other hand, you regularly eat lean meats, fruits, vegetables, you will have healthy benefits to your body—your body will take in those nutrients and you will fight disease better and be stronger and even enjoy your life more. Jesus is teaching this to the disciples, and then to us, on a spiritual scale. Take God into your spirit—take God into your very self and your spirit will flourish and you will have abundant life.

When I think about what we generally eat spiritually in our culture—what we take into ourselves and absorb on a regular basis—I think it is probably anger. We're taught that we have a right to have our needs met and we become indignant and angry when they are not. We have anger modeled for us in our homes and our communities, we have it modeled for us in our entertainment, we have it modeled for us in our political discourse. As a result, our country, in fact, most of the Western countries, end up full of angry, angry people. Irritated at the drivers who ease into our lane, infuriated that the product we bought from Wal Mart six months ago no longer functions properly, incensed that the waitress forgot to bring our extra ketchup, and furious, FURIOUS, with the people closest to us in our every day lives.

Do you remember the events of Oct. 2, 2006 in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania? Charles C. Roberts IV, a 32 year old truck driver, husband, and father of two, went into an Amish schoolhouse, ran out the adults and the boys, and shot 10 girls, wounding five and killing Anna Mae Stoltzfus, age 12, Mary Liz Miller, age 8, Lena Miller, age 7, Naomi Rose Ebersol, 7, then turning the gun on himself. His suicide notes mentioned his rage at himself over things he had done, and his rage at the world over the loss of his first child. The response of the Amish community was opposite to his. Before the day was over a member of the Amish community went over to the Roberts house and offered both comfort and forgiveness to the wife of Charles Roberts. They avoided the attention of the media, grieved for their loss, and forgave the man who wounded and killed their children. If ever there were any people who had a right to be angry—certainly much greater than any of our right to be angry over the illegal immigrant who might receive free health care at our expense—it was these people. So what had they been eating? What was in their bread? They had, all their lives, partaken regularly of the bread of peace and the wine of forgiveness. They took these into their bodies—not just once a month or once a quarter, but daily, with every meal. They nourished their spirits with the spirit of God, who transformed them into beings who were capable of an extraordinary act of hope and kindness.

I know sometimes that word transformation has a terrifying ring to it. Most of us have no wish to be transformed into something else. We begin to think of what we would give up—do we have to, as the Amish do, give up our access to Rock Band on the Play Station III? Do we have to give up having good times with our friends? Do we have to become holier than thou, churlish and perfect and rejected by all that is desirable and cool? Well, let me ask you this—do you think Jesus enjoyed his life? If not, why would you follow him? Why would you follow someone who hated his life? Do you think he spent his life thinking about all he gave up so that he could walk the path he walked? I'll tell you something, one thing that always brings me back to Jesus is that he seems to have genuinely loved his life. He loved people—he loved those smelly fishermen and enjoyed their company! He loved women and sought them out, even when the culture said it was not appropriate for him to do so. He rejected culture when it stood in the way of relationship and embraced it when it acted to feed the spirit. When Christians talk about transformation, they should be talking about abundant life—life filled with friends, with love and companionship! Life filled with food and celebration and people caring about each other, doing for each other, loving God, loving others, loving themselves! Can you find any fault in that?

Think about Jesus' instructions on the night he was betrayed. According to the gospel of Luke, he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." There is no word about cubes of Wonder bread or matza crackers, no word about tiny cups—he chooses bread and wine because they are the elements eaten every day. He was saying to the disciples, "This is the bread I want you taking into yourselves every day—whenever you eat bread, remember me and let me nourish you." He was saying, "This is the wine I want you to drink—whenever you drink wine, remember me and let me be the one to slake your thirst." This is not to say we are wrong to celebrate this together as an act of worship—in fact, it is just the opposite. It is to say that we are to take this worship out with us into our daily lives. Don't be afraid to start small—Jesus was not a fan of production numbers. When you take your morning biscuit, even if it has a piece of sausage in it, say to yourself, "Jesus, I remember you." When you have a glass of wine with your friends, say to yourself, "Jesus, I remember you." How often do you put a piece of bread in your mouth? What if each loaf of French bread, eat taste of rye, each bite of challah coincided with an intake of the spirit of the Lord? What if every bottle of Merlot put aside for some joyous celebration also became the living water of the Christ? How could your life help but be transformed? That anger that builds up in us like pockets of gun powder in our system, that rage that we tend and fan as if it were a flame on which our very lives depended, do you think it could stand up against the power of the Lord God Almighty? Would it be so bad if we were able to stop blaming our spouses for everything that is wrong in our lives? Would it be so terrible if we stopped hating our bosses for expecting too much or trusting too little? Would it be that horrible if, in our enormous wealth, we had to give up a little bit of something so that other people could have what they needed? Jesus, who was not above transforming the outside realities of the bodies he encountered for their health and well-being, offers us the same transformation for our spirits. Take this bread into your body and find a life filled with friends and family, with peace of mind and joy of heart. Take this wine into your body and embrace a life given to creation, abundance, compassion, and hope.

I was struck this week by a poem I heard on NPR's Fresh Air. Dan Fante, a writer and a recovering alcoholic, wrote a book of fiction, which he ended with some of his poetry. One of the poems is this one, called "Asking:"

For years I thought that talking to the gods was an exercise done privately  
Under unforgiving, distant stars  
Ridiculous unrequited prayer  
Evoked by staring at old cold books with mean small print

Then I discovered that just ain't it at all  
God can be found in the thank you voice of a guy at the counter of a supermarket  
Or the quietness of a stranger's parking lot smile  
Or the rattle of weeds across a dry summer Mohave  
Or watching my unfettered fingers jump jump jumping across the computer keys  
Deep in the middle of typing three hours worth of unscrubbed truth  
God for me turned out to be a conscious choice

A self-evoked experience, just like love.

So here is the question: what food will you take into yourself today? Will you come to this table? Will you take into yourself the spirit of unconditional love, made present on earth in the person of Jesus Christ? Will you come and act as priests to one another, sharing the bread and the wine? Will you come and remember that Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, broke the bread and gave thanks?

Let us give thanks:

Deacon Prayer

Sharing of the Bread

W: On this World Communion Sunday, together with our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world, we remember that Jesus said, "This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

W: On the same night, Jesus took the wine and gave thanks. Let us give thanks.

Deacon Prayer

Sharing of the Wine

M: Jesus said, "This is my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Drink of it, all of you.

W: With this bread and this cup we remember the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, until he comes. Amen.