

*Bread: Embodying Justice*

Read Luke 9:11-17

When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, 'Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.' But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said, 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.' For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, 'Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.' They did so and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

There is nothing like the aroma of bread baking, and the incredibly comforting and satisfying taste of warm, fresh bread. From "give us this day our daily bread" to "I am the bread of heaven" to the feeding of the 5,000 to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, this seemingly simple food is so theologically rich. It is used to represent Christ's body, God's provision of manna in the wilderness, and livelihood in general.

This passage from Luke is the story of a miracle, but bread itself is also miraculous. It is one of those everyday, ordinary miracles that we all too often overlook. We might eat it in the car, as a vehicle for transporting burgers to our mouths, as an afterthought...without even noticing it. We often consume, without savoring. We rarely

revel in the miracle of grain and yeast combining to rise into something delicious and nourishing. We forget to acknowledge the process—the grain growing, harvesting, and grinding, the kneading, rising, and baking. Bread is only attained by the mutual striving of God, community, and creation. Divine-human interaction is required. It doesn't just grow on the vine. God's creation provides the grain, and many people must join together to complete the process. One bite of bread represents worlds coming together, the beauty of science and art coming together to feed us.

We each need this sustenance to live into the fullness of life God calls us to. Right before Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowd, he has been attending to the sick, “curing those who needed healing.” But before that it says, he welcomed them, and taught them about the Kingdom of God. He cures them, he welcomes them, he teaches them, he feeds them. True nourishment entails much more than the physical act of eating.

The type of food that we eat and that we share matters. Where it came from—its story, its ingredients, its affect on the human body, the people who brought it to our tables...all of these elements are justice issues. While bread really only needs flour, yeast, water and salt, most commercial bread has 15 or more ingredients. While some bread has the nutrients of sprouted grains, some are void of any nutrition at all. There are also startling additions that are unrecognizable....some are ingredients that are also used to fertilize lawns or produce yoga mats. Bread has the potential to nourish, but not all bread is created equal. We can't be satisfied with healthy foods only being available to some people. The disciples tell Jesus that the crowds need to go into the villages to get provisions because they are in a place that is deserted, lonely, and isolated. They were in a place where there was little food to share, only five loaves and two fish. We still

have these deserted places today-these food deserts, where fresh healthy food is hard to come by and even harder to afford. In our context, it is not that we only have 5 loaves and two fish. We have shelves full of loaves and fishes, but they are only in certain neighborhoods. We do not need a miracle of multiplication, but a miracle of redistribution. And, it is more complicated than that.

Are we doing justice when we feed the crowds food that perpetuates systems of oppression—food that relies on subsidies and poorly paid workers to keep unhealthy food cheap? What about when we feed hungry people bread that is only empty calories, when we feed without nourishing body or Spirit? And when we do feed a neighbor in need, is offering “Yoga mat bread” the way to do justice and share the love of Christ? And, yet...is that better than no bread at all? How do we reconcile purchasing our locally-sourced, fairly-traded, organic foods to feed ourselves, when do not notice our neighbor in need? It is exhausting always trying to do and eat the right thing without allowing time or space for God to interrupt our lives? Out in the deserted, desperate places, what do we do when Jesus says, “**You** feed them?”

Following Jesus’ example, we begin with looking up to heaven and sharing what we have. Having our own bread is a blessing. Sharing that bread and having enough for all is a miracle. Embodying the bread of heaven is a sacrament. We must live in this sense of communion, because there are no easy answers.

Doing justice takes a variety of forms. It can start with our smallest, individual decisions to purchase food that has lesser environmental impact, to be concerned with workers wages and healthy ingredients. Through such meals, we can embody justice. But the work is not done. We cannot continue to stand by while those who toil to bring food to

our tables go hungry, and while the poorest among us suffer disproportionately from chronic disease, due to limited access to healthy food and health care. Justice also means asking questions of our lawmakers, challenging systems and working to impact broader change. At the North Carolina Council of Churches, food touches each issue we work on—including programs addressing farmworkers, immigration, health, and climate change. “Our justice work extends from rigorous policy analysis to stories of everyday grace.” In this story of grace in Luke, all ate, and all were satisfied. We want to help create systems that make the satisfaction of daily bread possible for everyone—in mind, body, and spirit.

Even when we are in the deserted areas, with no resources, with legislators enacting harmful policies, with despair looming and poverty real, at the end of the day, we are still asked to feed. To share bread—and the nourishment, fulfillment, and satisfaction it represents. Let us live somewhere between “give us this day our daily bread” and “You feed them.” Let us find ways to speak, preach, explore, and yearn for justice and nourishment for all. Let us continue to seek after what justice acts like, We need to rely on the provision of God even while doing our part to work for systems of justice, that all may be truly fed and sustained. It takes the hands of many to make bread.

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