

Loaves and Fishes

John 6:1-15

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One of the cool things about being a pastor is that I get to talk about bread at least once a month. Bread is so sensual, isn't it? The smell of yeasty bread rising and baking is enough to make me swoon. The taste of really good bread is like nothing else in this world. The smooth, golden-brown brown crust on fresh-baked white bread calls to me. My hands adore the heft of a loaf of whole grain bread and the way fresh pita bread breaks open. You can even hear bread if you knock on a fresh-baked loaf. Really good bread touches all our senses.

About a year ago, my nurse practitioner broke the sad news to me that – among many other things – I need to be gluten-free for the rest of my life, so wheat bread is now on a long list of prohibited foods. I made up my mind pretty quickly that I would just have to appreciate the sight and smell and feel of fresh-baked wheat breads and lock the door on the part of my heart that wants to taste them. Gluten-free breads serve their purpose. Some of them are pretty good, and some of them ... aren't. So mostly I don't eat bread at all. I just appreciate it from a distance.

Last Sunday evening, while you were probably watching the Super Bowl, Dave took me to the New Woodshed to celebrate Valentine's Day. We hardly ever go to restaurants any more, but Valentine's Day is special and we decided to make an exception. Our table was right by the fireplace. It was really cozy and beautiful. The whole evening was very romantic.

When our waiter arrived to explain the specials, I began asking him apologetic questions about ingredients. There was Chilean sea bass topped with panko bread crumbs. Could it be made without the bread crumbs? Unfortunately, not. And there was also a beef short rib served over creamy polenta – one of my favorite dishes. It sounded delicious, too, but it came with a gravy that surely included flour, so I made an alternate selection that I knew to be safe. I never said, "I have to be gluten-free." I don't believe I used the word "gluten" at all, but our alert server figured it out.

A few minutes later, he showed up at our table with a flower pot overflowing with fresh-baked bread – a Woodshed classic. He set it down on Dave's side of the table and said, "Here's your bread, sir." I thought that was really sensitive of him, not to put it near me, and I just breathed in that lovely aroma from across the table.

Then our waiter said, "I have some gluten-free bread warming for you in the oven. It will be out in a minute." I almost cried.

It was such a beautiful and generous gesture, one I hadn't asked for. For him to offer me the bread that I could eat, the bread that I needed, was so unexpected. And then the bread itself came. It was in a tiny flower pot, like a miniature version of the one Dave's bread was served in. And it smelled sooooo good! When I pulled back the paper liner, I saw there were three little dinner rolls, just a couple of bites each. They tasted just like the best white bread I had ever eaten in my life. Eating this bread wasn't at all like being punished. I felt so well cared for, so well nourished. The rest of the meal was lovely. But the gift of that bread made the evening for me.

A year ago, I had decided to focus contentedly on smelling and feeling and seeing bread, and I had locked the door on any idea of tasting it. Last week I learned that there had been a crack in that door all along, a piece of me that still really yearned for wonderful bread. And this waiter's thoughtful gesture, his kindness to me, his gift of really good bread that I could eat, reached in through the crack in that door and blew it wide open.

In bread-based cultures, bread is basic to survival for those who live on the margins. Bread is what keeps you going to the next day, and then you hope and pray for another loaf. Daily bread. But bread is more than only physical nourishment. It touches all our senses. Jesus knew this. I think it is why he used bread so often in his ministry. Give people what they need to make it to tomorrow. Give them what their hearts desire, too. Give them bread.

Today's scripture tells the familiar story of Jesus feeding the multitudes with five small loaves and two fish. The people have chased Jesus to this mountainside to hear him preach, perhaps to see a miracle. Surely, they do not expect to be fed dinner. Jesus hasn't done that before in his ministry.

But here they are, late in the day, no place nearby to get a meal. Jesus sees each person there, what their heart needs, what their body needs, and so he takes what is at hand, a little boy's lunch – five small loaves and two fish – and multiplies it into a banquet with enough for all, and more to spare. I wonder if the doors to their hearts burst open in that moment.

Jesus sees each of us clearly. He knows what is in our hearts, even when we hide it from ourselves. He knows the doors we have locked shut to protect ourselves. He knows what we yearn for.

Jesus bursts through the locked doors of our hearts and gives us exactly what we need. He nourishes us, body and soul.

Thanks be to God. Amen