

August 9, 2015

Northwood United Church

Enough For All

There are many stories in the gospels when Jesus is eating bread, or sharing bread, or blessing bread. There is the Last Supper and the loaves and fishes story and in the story today Jesus tells us he is the bread of life. Jesus invites us to see him as a form of nourishment. His teaching extends to his disciples and to us that we will never go hungry if we just believe he is in fact the bread of life.

In an article I read recently in the United Church Observer magazine, the writer shared various stories of mishaps during worship services. One of the stories was about Communion and how the student minister almost wiped out her supervisor as she broke the loaf apart- it must have been a tough loaf of bread!

This reminded me of my very first time assisting with the communion liturgy as a student minister. As the elements were placed on the alter table that morning before service, I noticed the absence of the bread for breaking. This was something I was looking forward to... the actual breaking of the bread! I asked the minister if there was a store near by that I could drive to get some bread- she said there wasn't time, but there was a Subway down the street. I ran over to the sandwich shop and asked for a subway- hold the sandwich fixings! It cost me \$8.00 for the subway bun, but I had no choice. Well I did break the bread at that pivotal moment during the Communion service and I'll never forget that first time.

In our Exodus story this morning, when Moses explained to the Israelites that God would provide, I don't think he really knew in what capacity that this would occur. Moses trust in God to give the people what they needed was all he could go by. God told Moses to give specific instructions to respect the Sabbath which was custom to refrain from work on the seventh day. Unfortunately, people's greed got the better of them and they put away more than they could consume and the surplus rotted. The Israelites were afraid they wouldn't have enough food for the days to come. The need for bread in this early stage of the journey out of Egypt provides both God and God's people with an opportunity to understand and to trust the other. Throughout this story the people struggle to trust and to follow God, and God tries to nurture this troubled community of former slaves.

The language of the complaint is strong. One might even say it is unfair. In verse 3 we hear the Israelites say to Moses and his brother Aaron, 'If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'. But as we know from earlier chapters of Exodus, the harsh bondage the people suffered in Egypt bears no resemblance to this description of the plenty they claim they enjoyed there. Interestingly, the people make no mention of pharaoh and his unreasonable demands. In an indirect way, the people seem to blame God both for their current crisis in the wilderness as well as their enslavement: "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt". Pharaoh was the one trying to kill them in Egypt. God *rescued* them! Their hunger leads them to what seems to be willful forgetfulness. God saves them in a variety of ways: by providing clean water to drink, parting of the sea for travel and now nourishment in the form of manna. It seems however that with all the grumbling going on, God dismisses their complaints and focuses on their needs. When He gives Moses instructions that the people must gather specific amounts on specific days and respect the Sabbath it is a form of divine test.¹ At the heart of the matter, there is some structure here that God's people must follow.

The kind of instructions in a recipe for bread, say. Follow all the steps, measure out the ingredients precisely, mix and bake accordingly. As the bread is baking, the aroma of yeast and flour permeates the house and you wait in anticipation for that tasty loaf to come out of the oven. But what if you've left out an ingredient, or put too much of something into the mixture, it's just not going to taste right. No amount of butter and honey is going to improve the flavour of a slice of this bread.

At the heart of the matter, God was creating structure, giving the exact ingredients as it were, to provide an assurance of God's faithfulness to his people.

In verses 2-3, the people claimed to long for Egypt and its bounty, but what Egypt really represented was a complete lack of provisions with a pharaoh who cared nothing for their well-being or their needs. The stress and chaos of life on the journey of the children of Israel through the wilderness is intense and debilitating, so much so that the people begin to long for their former lives as slaves in Egypt. As they long to go back, God's grace pushes

¹ Divine testing theme from commentary of author Callie Plunket-Brewton Exodus 16:2-15 Workingpreacher.org

them forward by providing strength for the journey in the form of food and a structure to their days and weeks by the instructions regarding the keeping of the Sabbath. In the hands of a trustworthy God, the former reality of their lives in Egypt is a distant memory. Here, bread and rest -- on the Sabbath -- are provided generously and reliably. The bread from heaven was enough for all. They needed to trust that God's generosity would carry them through the sparse times, even when they doubted. (Pause) Even when the situation seems hopeless, they learned to trust God. (Pause) Here, God brings the Israelites to a new place of understanding.

For us, there are times in our daily lives that are uncomfortable; we may doubt God, as we seek to understand difficult situations. The uncertainty of moving forward into something new, taking a risk, is scary.

In closing, I'd like to share with you a story...There's a group of people in Toronto that have taken a risk to provide a gathering place in a downtown park. In Dufferin Grove Park there is an outdoor communal oven where once or twice a week people come to make pizzas for a picnic in the park. Having a public oven in the heart of downtown Toronto, where so many people know so little about one another's stories, is a good thing. This place attracts people from all walks of life, they share stories, meeting old friends and new. This outdoor oven is a welcoming place, a gathering place, a place for nourishment. Just as Jesus did, this group extends radical hospitality for anyone who shows up. This community was born out of their imagination of wanting to build relationships in the community. Bread...enough for all.

Whatever is in store for us, when we accept Jesus as the Bread of Life, we can be nourished in a profound way. Whatever way you slice it, Jesus is a delicious part of who we are. God yearns for a relationship with us. The One we can trust to feed us, so we may be a source of nourishment for others so their hearts and souls are full.

I leave these thoughts with you. Amen