

Sharing bread, sharing life

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, August 2, 2009: the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Ephesians 4:4-7, 11-16; John 6:24-35.*

There are some people who can't resist chocolate. You know who you are. I have my moments, but by and large, chocolate isn't one of my big temptations. Bread, however, is. The venerable high school I attended in my hometown in South Carolina was located on a hill above a venerable bakery. Every afternoon we emerged from school into the incredible aroma of freshly baked bread. I never actually saw or tasted that bread, except perhaps later, uniformly sliced in plastic bags on the supermarket shelves. But the smell was heavenly.

Living here in New York, in this densely populated urban environment, bread seems much more ... well, visible. As I walk to work, I see thick brown sacks of freshly made bread left at restaurant doors. Here in midtown, there seems to be a coffee and pastry cart on every corner. Bakeries and other food store windows display an amazing variety of freshly made breads, each more gorgeous—and delicious—than the last.

At one point in my suburban past, I took up bread-baking, learning to make a variety of breads, which were actually edible, even tasty. My mother gave me my grandmother's bowls, bread pans, rolling pin and ancient flour sifter; so in learning this art for myself, I felt connected to generations of my family. I liked the process of measuring and sifting and combining, letting the dough rise, feeling it move and change like a living thing as I kneaded it. Finally, there was the reward of warm, beautifully crusted bread to eat and to share.

I haven't made bread since then—probably a function of having significantly less kitchen space

and less time. But what I learned then makes me appreciate the quality of the ingredients, the time and the skill it takes to make good bread.



These crowds who have tracked Jesus down were some of the five-thousand-plus people Jesus had just fed with as much bread as they wanted, starting with the five small barley loaves, and ending with twelve large basketfuls left over. In this exchange we overhear, Jesus knows they have come searching for him because they want to stay connected with him so they'll always have enough food. It's hard to blame them—having enough food is one of the basic needs of life. Remember Maslow's hierarchy of needs?¹ The triangle with our basic needs of food, water, shelter, clothing as the base layer. Next level up is the need for safety and security. That's where our current health care debate fits. We all want a safety net. Only after those needs get met do we begin to focus on other needs, like companionship and esteem, all the way up to self-actualization, achieving one's highest potential.

As their conversation with Jesus continues, the people seem to be talking and understanding on one level—the level of food to eat, how can we work to get this food—while Jesus is working on an entirely different level. Moses wasn't the one who provided the manna in the wilderness; it was God who provided. Whatever this bread is that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world—you bet we want that! Give us this bread

always! “I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

This conversation continues, and we’ll hear it unfolding in the coming Sundays. The longer it goes on, the more divided those listening to it become. Some will complain, Who is this guy? “Isn’t this Jesus, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” In this Gospel of John, Jesus reveals himself in these “I AM” sayings:

- ❖ I AM the bread of life (6:35)
- ❖ I AM the light of the world (8:12, 9:5)
- ❖ I AM the good shepherd (10:11)
- ❖ I AM the resurrection and the life (11:25)
- ❖ I AM the way, the truth, and the life (14:6)
- ❖ I AM the true vine (15:1)

Do you hear the echoes? *I AM who I AM.*

Could it really be that simple and that unbelievable?

It was hard for the people standing right there talking with Jesus, experiencing his presence and reality in the flesh, having eaten the bread he provided, to grasp what he was saying. I think it’s hard for us to grasp that, too. In *The Case for Christianity*, C. S. Lewis put it this way: “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn’t be a great moral teacher. He’d either be a lunatic—on the level with a man who says he’s a poached egg—or else he’d be the Devil of Hell. You must take your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.”



So here we are. Gathered in what some might call a great urban wilderness. Sitting on the vast green grass of our pews. Food in the wilderness becomes bread for the life of the world. In a few minutes, we’ll pray together, “Give us this day our daily bread,” and gather around this table to receive ... “the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” Receiving ... believing, perhaps some times more than others.

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

I heard a story this week of a man, a widower.² The first summer after his wife died, a woman from his church asked if she could come over to his yard and pick raspberries. She knew that he and his wife had grown the raspberry bushes from spindly mail-order plants into healthy shrubs laden with berries. She picked berries in the morning and returned that afternoon with a raspberry pie, still warm, with buttery homemade crust, red raspberries and filling bubbling through the lattice crisscrossing the top, smelling heavenly.

The widower thanked her for the pie, then surprising himself, he asked, “Would you stay and enjoy a piece with me?” the man asked. He poured them each a glass of 2% milk and they sat at his table together, savoring the sweet, tart berries; the flaky, tender, slightly salty crust; washing each bite down with cold milk.

That pie was a rare treat, and he could easily have enjoyed it himself, piece by delicious piece. But he had an idea. He packed up that pie, some paper plates and plastic forks and some milk in a thermos, and went to visit a friend. They visited while they ate pieces of that pie—small, but enough to savor the richness of all its flavors and textures.

He spent the rest of that day driving around town, sharing modest slices of pie with friends who he thought might not only enjoy the pie, but might actually need the pie—need some simple pleasure, some tangible reminder of love and care in edible form.

He and those friends he shared with found that even a small piece of pie could convey its essence of sunshine, earth, abundance, creativity, compassion. And in sharing his pie, the man realized something else: that he was part of a larger community, and that connection was part of what he hungered for.

Our communion wafers are not raspberry pie. But in gathering here, singing together, praying together, hearing the Word of God spoken and broken open together, coming around this table to receive our taste of the bread

of heaven and our sip of the cup of salvation—we may find, perhaps so gradually that we hardly realize it, that we are part of a larger community. A community that stretches beyond this space, and even beyond this time. We may find ourselves connected to generations past, present, and yet to come.

And deeply, deeply, we may find ourselves connected to Jesus, the bread of life, the true bread from heaven who continues, even now, to satisfy our deepest hungers and who continues, even now, to point past himself to God, the source of all life.

In fact, we may even find ourselves making pies, serving pies, teaching, being a friendly welcoming presence, carrying the cross, adopting orphaned children in Tanzania, who knows what else. We may find ourselves wanting—needing—to share what we’ve been given with others who need what we’ve been given.

That’s what this is all about. This bread of life, this true bread from heaven, is meant to be shared.

¹ Abraham Harold Maslow (1908-1970), an American psychologist noted for his conceptualization of a “hierarchy of human needs” and considered the founder of humanistic psychology.

² Story is from the Rev. Amy E. Richter, St. Anne’s Episcopal Church in Annapolis, MD, in *Sermons that Work* at www.episcopalchurch.org.