

Bread. What images come to mind when you hear that word? Perhaps a kind of bread that your father or grandmother baked, in an oven or a woodstove? Or a bread from your family's cultural heritage: Norwegian lefse, Puerto Rican pan sabao, Lebanese pita, German pumpernickel, Indian naan, Ethiopian injera, or Sicilian white bread with sesame seeds and olive oil brushed on the crust? Or maybe you think of a whole assortment of bread on the shelves and a whole blend of aromas when you walk into Rockland Bakery? What comes to mind when you think of bread?

Bread. We're hearing a lot about bread this month, in which our gospel lessons from John 6 report Jesus identifying himself as "the bread of life" or "the bread from heaven" or "the living bread." Last week we heard that he fed 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch, and now he tells the disciples—and the crowd who have "eaten their fill" of the little boy's loaves: "I am the bread of life."

What do you suppose came to mind for the disciples and the crowd when they heard Jesus say that? Well, they probably weren't thinking of pumpernickel or ciabatta. Bread, for Palestinians in the first century, was very simple: leavened or unleavened, made of barley or wheat. Nearly every meal included bread, and it was such an important part of the diet that the Hebrew word for bread, *lehem*, also means "food." Where have you heard that Hebrew word before? *Lehem*. I can take a bet that every one of you has heard it before, because *lehem* is part of the name of Jesus' birthplace, Beth-lehem. Bethlehem means, literally, "house of bread."

For those whom Jesus fed with the little boy's lunch that day, bread was the main source of nourishment, and preparing it was a daily activity. The women carried water home from a well and spent three hours milling grain with a mortar and pestle—and another hour preparing the dough, sometimes adding a starter from a previous batch of dough or stirring in olive oil or sesame seeds or fruit. Finally they baked the dough, leavened or unleavened, on heated stones or a griddle or in a pit oven.

For people in Jesus' time, bread was the staple food, providing at least fifty percent of daily caloric intake, and most families expended a quarter of their daylight hours preparing it. It was the most important food they had, the food they ate most frequently, the food without which they would have had a hard time surviving. It's no accident that the lunch the boy gave to Jesus in last week's gospel story included bread. As a staple food, bread was always on the table, feeding the first century Palestinians and providing half of their nutrition.

How different our approach to bread! For us, bread is not a staple food, nor does making it consume our waking hours. You yourself may eat it only sparingly or occasionally, and the time you spend on it probably amounts to the few minutes it takes to choose what kind you want. We don't eat bread at every meal, and we don't spend hours gathering grain and milling and mixing and kneading and baking, so it's hard for us to understand the significance of bread in Jesus' culture.

Bread is not only less significant for us than it was for first century Palestinians; by some it's considered to be an enemy of our efforts toward health. Heather Bauer, author of [Bread Is the Devil](#), writes, "When you're hungry, tired, or stressed, you tend to reach for bread products, not carrot sticks. Problem is, the more bread you eat, the more you want." Kris Gunnars, who writes for an nutritional

website, explains that “the starches in bread get broken down quickly in the digestive tract and enter the bloodstream as glucose. This causes a rapid spike in blood sugar and insulin levels. When blood sugar goes up rapidly, it tends to go down just as quickly. When it goes down, we become hungry, [and then we are in danger of eating anything in sight].” Gunnars concludes: “[B]read and other sources of gluten grains are unnecessary at best and potentially harmful [at worst].”

When we hear Jesus speak of himself as the bread of life in today’s gospel, is he suggesting that he is harmful for us? Is he advising us to relate with him in the same way that we eat bread—avoiding him or interacting with him only sparingly or occasionally? Does he want us to ignore him as the Bread of Life as often as we decline an offer of bread? To think of him as an enemy in our efforts to be healthy, even casting him, perhaps, as the “Devil” of Bauer’s book? If Jesus says he is the bread of life, does he mean that he is unnecessary for us—or harmful—or even evil?

This metaphor of Jesus as bread of life doesn’t work so well in our modern American culture, does it? And there are many cultures whose staple food is something other than bread; in parts of Africa, it’s plantain. In both Sweden and Ireland, it’s the potato. In Mexico, it’s corn, called maize. In China and India and Japan, it’s rice. If Jesus had lived in one of these places, he might have said, “I am the plantain of life—or the maize of life—or the rice of life.” To a Japanese ear, “I am the bread of life” might sound like this... “Jesus is like bread; he comes from the outside, and he doesn’t really belong. Jesus, unlike our staple food, rice, is optional. We eat rice every day, with every meal, but bread is an extra; it’s something we can add on—or not.” Was Jesus saying that he is a nice option, but unnecessary? Maybe the bread of life is not a very helpful image of Jesus for most moderns, since we don’t think of bread as a staple food, and since we can take it or leave it. Jesus as the bread of life doesn’t translate so well culturally, or across the centuries.

So let’s go back to the bread that Jesus himself ate. What did “bread” mean in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, the Bible that Jesus knew in his time? “Bread,” which appears over 200 times in the Hebrew Bible, simply means a loaf baked from dough, intended for a meal, but it’s also used as a kind of shorthand for physical or spiritual sustenance in general. In saying, “I am the bread of life,” Jesus meant that he is the source of life and the provider of sustenance, both physical and spiritual. And it’s clear from our text for today that he also meant that he is the source not only of earthly life but also of eternal life.

Martin Luther borrows this more comprehensive understanding of bread as “that which sustains life” in his explanation to the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Do you know that petition? “Give us this daily our daily bread.” “Daily bread,” Luther writes, “includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout spouse, children, workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, a good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” For us, Jesus is this “bread” which keeps us alive, which sustains us in body and spirit for daily life.

For those who had “had their fill of the loaves” the little boy brought to Jesus, bread was a staple, a food absolutely necessary to sustain life. They received Jesus as that which sustained them, that literally kept them alive. How can we, who do not depend upon bread to survive, receive Jesus as the bread of life? Can we translate this metaphor, putting ourselves in first century Palestine and embracing Jesus as the one who gives us life and nourishes us to continue for another day? Or can we recognize that Jesus, in our context, is for us what bread is not? Unlike bread in the U.S. in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, Jesus is not one option among many. Jesus is not an addition to a life-sustaining diet; Jesus is not an appetizer or a dessert. He is not an appetizer—what you eat before you eat; nor is he a dessert—what you eat after you eat. Instead, Jesus is the center of the meal; he is all that you need. Through him you receive life; by him you are nurtured and sustained; without him you cannot live; but, with him, you will live forever.

That's why Jesus offers himself to you as the bread of life, week after week, so that you can eat and never be hungry—and as wine or grape juice, so that you can drink and never be thirsty. He offers himself to satisfy your hunger, to slake your thirst. So come, my friends, come and dine. The table is set, your place is ready. Come and receive the bread of life now and forever. Be nurtured and sustained on your journey, wherever you are going, whatever you are experiencing, however you are feeling, whether you are traveling alone or with others. Come to the table, take your place, and feast on the Bread of Life, Bread for the world, Bread for you, now and forever. AMEN