

Pray for Bread
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
July 24, 2016

In this morning's Gospel, the disciples make a request of Jesus that, I'm sure, has occurred to each of us at one time or another. And maybe, during this time of increased focus on political theatre, the stratification of rich and poor, mass casualty events and foreign leaders who seem all too eager to go to war—maybe during this scary time, the request is that much more timely: the disciples ask, "Lord, teach us to pray."

And Jesus does. He teaches us to pray. He teaches us to pray about bread. Jesus provides a template for prayer that will be taught across the world, translated into every language, carved into altars in city cathedrals and humble rural churches alike. Jesus teaches the disciples the prayer that will become emblematic of the entire Christian faith. Jesus distills our entire relationship with God and one another into four couplets. And it all comes back to the bread.

Several years ago, I was holding the pager for the hospital where I was a chaplain, and I received an emergency page early on a Sunday morning. One of the women who brought Eucharist around to the patients—a wonderful and saintly woman named Eileen—had paged me and was incredibly upset. I called her, and after I finally calmed her down enough to understand her story, I gathered that Eileen had accidentally dropped about 40 consecrated wafers on the floor of a hospital room. She didn't know what to do. I told her I'd be right over.

I got to the hospital, and Eileen was standing outside of a patient's room. The patient had some kind of infection, and so we Eileen and I had to gown up, glove up and get down on our hands and knees, picking up little crumbs of the holy wafers that had fallen all over the floor. Typically, if I drop a wafer, I'd just eat it, but in this case, there were forty of them, AND it's never wise to eat anything that's been on the floor of a hospital. We gathered the wafers and pieces of wafers into a napkin and buried them in the garden, with reverence and prayer.

How can something so simple, so ordinary as bread, generate such reverence and concern in Christians? I'm sure it's a little strange to look at from the outside. Why are all these otherwise normal people getting so bent out of shape about little pieces of bread.

Whether you are on the Catholic end of things or the Protestant end of things, we all agree that there is something holy about this bread from God. It is life. It is a perfect combination of nature's effort and human effort. Bread is common. Bread is mundane. And yet, bread is the way that Jesus taught us to be in relationship with one another. Break bread. Share bread. Forgive one another. Break bread. Share bread. Forgive one another.

I'm fairly certain that the Lord's Prayer was the first one I ever learned, maybe at age 5, and it might be for you as well. For most of us, it's written on our hearts. I say it when words fail me. I've cared for people deep in the grasp of dementia who could barely remember their own names

but who could recite the Lord's Prayer effortlessly. Its ubiquity makes it hard to remember its radical nature.

Imagine what our first instinct for prayer might be in troubled times: might we pray for power? Might we pray for a sword or an army? Might we pray for the ability to dominate enemies, to build walls, to coerce obedience? In times of trouble, these seem like sensible things to ask of God almighty. I believe I've heard some of these kinds of prayers in the news lately.

But Jesus invites us into a different prayer life. Jesus asks us to pray in a way that goes counter to our baser instincts. He invites to pray for bread. Jesus' prayer is the power of simple things. It is the power of humble food. It is the power of sharing life with one another. Violence and oppression have no place in the prayers of God.

And before you think that things were rosy in first century Palestine, please remember that Jesus and his band of disciples were living as religious minorities under the occupation of the Roman state. They were creating a new religion and grappling with the same foreign power that had destroyed their Temple, corrupted their high priests, conscripted their young men and sent their money to Rome. These people knew a thing or two about troubled times. And still, even with this occupation in the background, Jesus tells his followers to pray about bread and about forgiveness.

In 1941, Woodie Guthrie famously wrote on his guitar "this machine defeats fascists." Amen, brother. And that goes for the bread of life as well. We belong to a kingdom with no armies and no borders; a kingdom whose central characteristic and whose only membership requirement is the breaking bread and the forgiveness that follows. It is an absolutely a crazy club to which we belong. It would be much easier to have a God who promised empires and retaliation.

Instead we follow a Savior who teaches us to ask for only what we need. A God who manifests in the simple, the beautiful, the everyday.

And that is why we show some reverence for the bread. We respond with humility to the bread of heaven broken for us week in and week out—to remind us that we belong to God, that we belong to each other, that we practice a different kind of religion.

I will leave the higher level mysteries of the exact relationship of the bread at the altar and the essence of God to better theologians than I. Those conversations typically involve lots of Latin words, the meaning of which escapes me. But I take our prayer seriously: give us this day our daily bread. And I take God's response seriously: to be there with us whenever we gather together and break bread, to be there with us whenever we tell the story. God is there. In the forgiving of sins. In the people, the Body of Christ. And yes, in the bread. Amen.