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“For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

The earliest known archaeological evidence of breadmaking dates from more than 14,000 years ago in what is now Jordan near where Jesus would walk many millennia later. That bread was made of wild wheat, barley and plant roots.

Archaeologists theorize that because of the invention of bread, the first human settlements formed.

Before human settlements, nomadic hunters-and-gatherers roamed the countryside, living off the land, hunting animals and harvesting berries and roots.

But when people discovered how to make bread, they needed to cultivate grains, and to cultivate grains they needed to tend to their fields, and to do that, they settled in communities.

Nearly every culture on earth makes bread. Humans are incredibly ingenious at converting grains into bread: wheat, barley, rice, corn and more.

California Indians made flatbread by first grinding acorns and pine nuts into flour. If you look around the Sierra foothills you can still find their grinding stones in the boulders and bedrock near creeks.

Bread is considered the first processed food. To make bread requires harvesting and milling grain – sometimes adding yeast, sometimes not – kneading dough and transforming it with fire.

Bread comes in all shapes, sizes and textures. Bread can be light and fluffy or dense and dark.

In Sacramento, you can find a bakery on El Camino Avenue where Afghan refugees make nan bread four feet long. People line up around the block to get it.

There is nothing simple about making bread.

I did a little reading about bread making this week, and what I discovered is that authors of bread cookbooks write more than just about the techniques of bread making.

Author Peter Reinhart, author of “Brother Juniper’s Bread Book,” writes of how bread making is “mystical,” and how each step in bread making is a “pilgrimage.”

He writes of when he breaks bread and hears its crunch, “I was beginning, in this perfect moment, to cry.”

This is not green beans we are talking about.
Author Peter Mayle writes that bread emerging from the oven “is one of the oldest, most appetizing and evocative smells in the world, primitive and infinitely comforting.”

There is nothing more elemental to being human than bread – and the sharing of bread.

If you think about it: Long before the time of the internet, long before the time of the printing press, long before the time of Jesus and Moses, and long before the time of even the written word, people sat in front of a warm fire and shared bread.

As they share this bread, they tell the stories of how their Creator, by whatever name they knew their creator, had saved their ancestors from certain calamity, against all odds, in the bleakest moments imaginable.

In the sharing of bread, these old stories come alive once again, and the old stories became their stories, too.

They know in these moments that they, too, will make it against all odds, in the bleakest moments imaginable.

How perfect it is, then, that the central act of our worship is here, at this table, sharing bread.

We sit in front of the fire – the candles – and we hear the ancient stories of our ancestors – the Bible – and how they survive against all odds, and these stories come alive, and become our stories.

We hear of Jesus sharing many meals with saints and sinners, tax collectors and even prostitutes.

We remember Jesus feeding the multitudes, and feeding people one at a time in Martha’s kitchen.

We remember a particular meal every Sunday. We remember how Jesus, on the night before he died, broke bread and shared it with his closest friends, and how he shared a cup of wine.

We remember how he told them that no matter the odds, no matter how bleak things looked, he would be with them to the end of the ages, especially when they shared bread.

By our sharing bread at this table, this story becomes our story. Do you want to know Jesus? Share bread today, here at this table.

What we do here is as human as the baking of bread, and as sweetly divine as bread coming out of the oven.

When we share this bread of our Holy Eucharist – the word means “thanksgiving” in Greek – we make this holy bread, holy in ourselves.

We become one with Christ’s body, and we become one with each other.
As we do, we can experience Christ’s presence with every sense of our being, even in our touch as we hold the bread, and even with our sense of smell and taste as we eat the bread.

This is not some magical alchemy about converting bread into something else. The question is not how the bread is changed but how are we changed by the bread we share. And how are we changed Sunday after Sunday, year by year, as we share this bread?

Bring all who you are to this table as we share this bread. Bring your worries, your cares, your wounds, and wrap them into a prayer, and put this prayer into your outstretched hands. And then exchange this prayer in your hands for the bread of life.

As you do, look around you. We aren’t alone in this. When we share in the bread, we become one with each other.

In France, in the region of Provence, there is an old tradition where on Christmas morning villagers bring a fresh loaf of bread they have lovingly baked the night before, and leave it at the town fountain. Then they pick up another loaf of bread and take it home.

Author Peter Mayle writes, “This was said to renew good relations between inhabitants who had fallen out with one another during the year.”

We live in world that is fallen out with one another on so many levels. We are fractured by nations, and fractured by religions, race, social status, and politics. We are fractured sometimes in our families – and we are fractured sometimes even in ourselves.

The way to heal the world, is right in front of us, and this way is as old as humanity: The bread of God. Share this bread with each other. Share our stories with each other. Know Jesus is with us and within us. Eat more bread, and give thanks.

“For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

Amen.

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3 Mayle, p. 31