

## Spirituality of Bread Part II

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### A land of wheat and barley

*The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land given you (Deuteronomy 8:7-10)*

The bread we bake, buy, break apart, slice, and eat begins in distant fields where barley, rye, and wheat are grown and harvested. Even if we bake bread, most of us living in cities rarely come in contact with the fields where grain grows. The separation of Christian life from the land can be a challenge; after all, we ourselves come from the stars, the seas, and the evolution of life on earth: an evolution that took place within the land, its seasonal cycles, and the experience of seeding, growing, harvesting, and dying. No wonder the book of Genesis refers to the primal parents and thus all humans as ‘*adam*’ – as “earth creatures.” Untethered to the land, we can be subject to amnesia, forgetting whence we came and whence comes all that sustains life.

*The Book of Common Prayer* invites us to consider our relationship with the land: “For the good earth which God has given us, and for the wisdom and will to conserve it, let us pray” (BCP 384); “Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its gifts rightly in the service of others” (BCP 388). These prayers concerning care for the land, the first in any North American worship book, ask us to acknowledge that the land has been given to us by God; it



is not ours to own. Thus, it can be helpful to keep in mind that from a biblical perspective, humans are tenants or stewards rather than owners. And as those who have received God’s gift of land, it is the responsibility of humans to conserve this precious gift. [Marcel Dyf, “Gleaners,” 1925]

It is good to remember that ours is an **earthy spirituality**. Of course generations of Christians have been told that their purpose in life is to leave this world behind and have faith or work diligently in order to enjoy “spiritual” union with God elsewhere. Does that ring a bell? You know: leave this vale of tears – as if God were somehow not present now to human and more than human experience! Ironically, a focus on eternal life continues to resonate throughout many of the collects found in *The Book of Common Prayer* and *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*.

But, then, it depends on one's view, doesn't it? The *Left Behind* series, so popular among conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, envisions the end of earth with only a few VSC [Very Special Christians] being raptured into the heavens as everything burns up to a crisp. Please note: This is a message preached in thousands of American churches. Well, it is one way to think about the Last Things. Another one envisions God making God's home here on earth: *See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be the people of God and God will be with them* (Revelation 21:3). Which vision do you choose to live out in the present: no responsibility for earth because one's true home is elsewhere or discerning the presence of the holy, the numinous, right here on earth, as close to you as the miracle of yeasty bread?

If life on earth matters and matters *now*, then it stands to reason that one might be as curious as possible about life *here* – as in, what kind of grain is being used to make the bread we eat? Is it organic or genetically modified? Are there good or harmful additives in the dough that will become the loaf of bread one will purchase and then eat at home? Does anyone know why *acerola cherry powder* is in the bread we eat? [I looked it up: *malpighia emarginata* appears to be chock full of Vitamin C; who knew?]. The next time you're in the grocery store, take a look at the many ingredients found in a loaf of Wonder Bread: oh yes, it's a soft bread with good shelf life but that's so because of additives and the eco-unfriendly packaging. By way of contrast, consider the Brown Paper Baking Co. in Tacoma, a Community Supported Bakery [CSB, sibling of CSA] where only organic flour, water, salt, and yeast form loaves of wonderful bread: <https://brownpaperbaking.com/bakes>.



We bite into that fragment of bread and taste more than the bread. We taste the soil, the grain, the sun, and the water that brought the grain to life. Yet there's more: we taste the work of those who sowed, tended, and harvested the grain; of those who labored to make the dough and bake the loaves we find in the market or grocery store – or the flour we buy to make bread in its many forms and tastes. “We expect to have bread on hand at every meal, as background, as completion, as dependable comforter for any stress or disappointment the rest of the meal might occasion,” writes Margaret Visser. “Bread is for us a kind of successor to the motherly breast, and it has been over the centuries responsible for billions of sighs of satisfaction.” [Giovanni Lanfranco, “Elijah Receiving Bread From the Widow of Zarephath,” 1621]

### Sharing bread

No different than wine, bread is meant to be shared: *He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them* (Luke 22:19). For thousands of years, bread has been broken apart by hand into fragments in order

to share it with family or friends or guests. *The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves"* (Genesis 18:1-3, 5). It can come as a surprise when guests find a baguette placed on the table with the invitation to break off whatever amount they would prefer: no bread neatly cut into individual slices. Bread needs to be broken or sliced as the loaf is too large for one bite, one mouth.



Indeed the archeological remains of bread suggest that from its inception, bread was intended to be shared: there is no evidence of little individual butter rolls; only large loaves to be pulled apart by a group. Perhaps that is so because early human communities (and a good number of contemporary ones) were “strong group societies” in which the good of the group was preferred over the demands of the individual. Sharing in the family, tribe, village, or town trumped the idiosyncrasies of the individual. For the most part, we see this practice surviving in churches where bread is broken into fragments and shared with those receiving communion: a “strong group practice” in the “weak group society” of the United States where individual desire trumps all others. And the highly individualized character of American life, into which we have all been socialized, is deepened by the use of individual wafers and, as we see in some Christian communions, the use of small, individualized communion shot glasses (bearing the historical imprint of their racist origins).

What distinguishes sacramental Christians from “ordinance” Christians is a 180 degree separation in theology. The latter dominates American religion. It focuses on the need for the individual to *make a decision* for Christ in order to be saved from eternal damnation, regardless of all the “loving Jesus” language that is used in such communities. The emphasis is placed on the individual’s decision that is then followed by an “ordinance” to baptize the person. Baptism effects *little* except the public recognition that the individual has given her or his life to God. This in turn leads to the occasional “ordinance” of communion in which each individual *takes* a small cube of bread and *takes* a tiny cup of grape juice in memory of Jesus. Again, this “ordinance” serves as a mnemonic device of something very special that happened in the past. It effects little in the present. Do you notice the emphasis on individual action as the primary thing?

By way of contrast, sacramental Christians – Lutherans, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox – hold that the primary actor is God, the Holy Three, and that God acts in, with, and through God’s creation to communicate, be present with, and lead people. The finite and ordinary is capable of welcoming and communicating an infinite and cosmic presence. *Finitum capax infinitum*.

Perhaps this is why early Christian preachers and catechists spoke of the altar and its bread as the breast of the church (remember Visser's "bread as motherly breast"?). What has been born in the watery womb of the font is immediately



brought to altar to be fed at the breast. There is no individual taking bread in memory of something special from the past but rather this: Christ is feeding his people with his life through bread (and wine cup). [English stained glass, the Pelican in her Piety: the mother feeding her starving chicks with her own flesh and blood, an image prominent in medieval English spirituality] No wonder the 14<sup>th</sup> c. English mystic, Julian of Norwich, spoke of Christ as our mother, here in the paraphrase of Jean Janzen :

*Mothering God, you gave me birth  
in the bright morning of this world.  
Creator, source of every breath,  
you are my rain, my wind, my sun.*

*Mothering Christ, you took my form,  
offering me your food of light,  
grain of new life, and grape of love,  
your very body for my peace.*

That is an arresting image of Christ – the mother who feeds her children with bread and drink. And this, too: it is an image of dependence that pushes against the deeply American notion of the individual's absolute independence from anyone and anything, the notion of taking, grasping, achieving, winning. Of course, our world is filled with protests against any form of dependence (albeit rightful protestations when focused on submission or abuse). And yet, the human being has been created with a social nature. As the great Berkeley sociologist, Robert Bellah (an Episcopalian) has pointed out: atomistic individualism is a lie and when attached to religion produces continual sectarianism to the point where all that's left is "the church of me." None of us created ourselves; none of us have made it through life relying only on our selves; and none of us will leave this world all by ourselves – someone will have to bury or cremate us.

My many students, raised on atomistic individualism, are surprised when I ask them to write a list of all the persons who made it possible for them to be in class on a given day: from the group that makes possible water for a shower or a cup of coffee, to those who picked the coffee beans, to the person/s who invented the coffee machine, to those who created their clothing and invented the laptop. We are resolutely dependent on a host of persons and the earth itself who make living possible: just ask any evergreen that is absorbing our carbon monoxide and cleaning the air for us. Being fed by another is such a homely image and yet it aptly describes what happens at the eucharistic table: sacramental communion – being fed bread by another – brings to awareness the truth of our social nature and our dependence on others for life.



## Bread and Peace

In 1915, Jane Addams, the founder of the modern social work movement, joined other women – all pacifists – who represented the warring nations of World War I, in their effort to negotiate a cessation of armed conflict. Addams travelled to the Netherlands for this congress of women committed to peace. Their work ended in failure – the war only increased in civilian and military deaths and diminished bread production leading to widespread food insecurity, to debilitating hunger. By the winter of December 1918, Western and Central Europe and Western Asia were experiencing alarming bread shortages, growing famine, and high death rates.



In 1919, women from around the world met again, this time in Zurich. At this congress of the *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, they considered the Russian Revolution in its infancy and their hope that the land – owned by the well-fed few and worked by the chronically hungry millions – would be given to the peasants as their land, the peasants

who produced the grain and flour that provided bread for the nation. At the same time, the League decried the overly harsh measures imposed on Germany and its allies; they believed such punitive measures directed at the people (not the leaders) of Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire would destabilize Central Europe and lead to another war. Well, they were correct.

Though she was admired for her work in bringing to birth the social work movement in the United States – a movement supported by Christian proponents of the Social Gospel – Addams was vilified by members of Congress and the press for what they called her “lack of patriotism” – that is, her denunciation of war and the industry that thrived on war-making: arms manufacturers. Her 1922 book, *Peace and Bread in Time of War* was, in part, her response to these attacks – a reflection on the political implications of bread loss and subsequent hunger. At the heart of her work was this conviction: there is a deeper instinct in human beings than the urge to fight and kill one's fellow human beings: that instinct, Addams claimed, is the impulse to care for and nurture life. Such care begins with feeding those who are hungry; it begins with ensuring that every woman, man, and child has adequate bread. What does chronic hunger produce? Physical pain, despair, and violence. Indeed, it can produce brutal revolutions.

Though she was not a mother with children, Addams called upon mothers – newly enfranchised with the vote – to recognize the political dimension of caring for their children: where there is adequate bread and loving regard, there is life, growth, and security. In a nation that holds as its first priority an ethic of care for fundamental human need, poor health, anxiety, and acting out in anger diminish. Where there is “bread equity,” people experience a greater measure of social

justice. Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32, 34-35)

In her 2002 book, *Growing Up Empty: The Hunger Epidemic in America*, Loretta Schwarz-Nobel supports the need for “bread equity” in her discussion of infant and childhood hunger. Without adequate nutrition in the proper amount, neurological development is impaired in infants, toddlers, and young children. Brain growth takes place over a period of time with some dimensions of growth (e.g., impulse control) not completed until the mid-20s. Imagine, then, what develops from slower brain growth. Schwarz-Nobel writes of diminished health, slower learning capacity, and angry acting out.

### Bread and Pandemic

Living in the midst of a pandemic for which there seems to be no national plan of engagement and no federal assistance for the growing numbers of the unemployed, the ability to purchase food has dropped precipitously across the nation. The American Association of Medical Colleges reports that more than 54 million Americans now experience food insecurity and the number is on the rise: that is, 1 in every 6 Americans does not have access to adequate “bread.” And, then, what of Washington State?

THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE RELYING ON FOOD ASSISTANCE HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC TO MORE THAN

**2.2 MILLION PEOPLE**

Source: Washington State Department of Agriculture

**30%**

OF HOUSEHOLDS ARE FOOD INSECURE

Source: University of Washington, 2020 Washington State Food Security Survey

PERSONS OF COLOR ARE

**1.5X MORE LIKELY**

TO BE FOOD INSECURE THAN WHITE PEOPLE

Source: University of Washington, 2020 Washington State Food Security Survey



For those who have adequate income and adequate or more than adequate supplies of food and drink, the biblical call to share from one's abundance (rather than one's surplus) invites us to “share our bread with the hungry” (Isaiah 58:7) and recognize the wounded and risen Christ in the hungry neighbor (Matthew 25:35). Keep in mind Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: unless physical needs are met, there will be little movement toward healthy relationships, a sense of meaningful accomplishment, and living a purposeful life. What, then, shall we do?

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