

“Debunking Religion: Communion”

Acts 2:43-47

I can smell it now – my Grandma’s bread baking in the oven. Homemade bread. The aroma, even in my imagination, can make my mouth water.

- Yeast bread
- Cinnamon bread

It didn’t matter. I knew when that bread was ready, I could get a big piece slathered in butter to enjoy. It was like love you could eat.

Grandma was good at that – making love you could eat. For Eric, it was her raisin cream pie. For my brother, it was oatmeal raisin cookies. For Uncle Chuck, it was dutch apple pie. For most of the grandkids, it was fried sweet bread with cream cheese frosting. She called them “saratogas” and they are so much a part of our grandma that we buried her with a few fresh saratogas in her hand. We figured Jesus would enjoy them as much as we did!

But my favorite aroma in the world is fresh bread baking. They say it’s a good way to sell a house – have that smell of home-baked bread when the prospective buyers come in. A whiff of nurture and love makes a house a real home.

That may be why the most common Biblical image is food.

- God gives all living creatures their food at creation
- God feeds the Exodus people manna – bread from heaven
- Christ is called The Bread of Life
- Feeding the hungry is a fundamental description of the Christian life
- God’s kingdom is compared to a feast
- Penitence for sin includes going without food – fasting
- Jesus is pictured repeatedly eating with friends and outcasts

When the church gathered in its earliest years, bread was, quite literally, life. When they broke bread together they were often eating a meal that for some was the sum total of their food for the day. Bread equaled life. It was life-giving... life-sustaining.

The simple, everyday act of breaking bread invites us to remember and celebrate God's goodness. Yet in the context of Christian worship, breaking bread means even more. As we break bread together, we receive and enter into the life of the body of Christ, and we become bread for our world. Through this giving and receiving, we share our faith, our lives, and our resources with all whom God loves.

The bread is love you can eat. It is life-giving, life-sustaining. It nourishes us for another week. Most of us are not hungry and starving in a physical sense. But communion is food for our souls. It reminds us to strive harder for the life Jesus led. It gives us spiritual strength and offers us not only a memory, but a future.

The homonyms - knead and need - tell us something of the nature of communion bread. Bread requires *kneading*; and people *need* bread. Dough, kept warm over time, will rise and multiply, literally tripling in size. Each of us needs a warm place to rise and grow. Communion is that warming of our spirits so that we can also grow.

My mom tells the story about when she was a young bride. Only 18, and poor as a church mouse, Mom saved money to surprise her young husband with love they could eat. She decided to try to make Grandma's bread without Grandma's help. She mixed the precious ingredients and watched them rise. When it was time to get the dough out and kneed it, she floured the countertop and placed the precious dough on it. She washed her hands and stood over the bread, ready to press all of the air out of the bread so that it could rise again and be light and fluffy.

That's when she began to cry. Looking at this dough, she realized that all she knew about kneading bread was from watching her mom. She had never done it herself.

You see, Grandma believed that making bread was an art form. Her hands were quick. She took the dough and flattened it. In one swoop, she put one end on top of another and pressed again. Turning it 90 degrees, she repeated the pattern. Again and again – flatten, fold, turn, flatten, fold, turn. It was artfully and efficiently accomplished. Mom cried because she didn't know how to perform the process and she was afraid her loving gift would be ruined.

About that time, my aunt Judy arrived. She quickly assessed the situation and took charge. She banged the bread down hard on the countertop. Mom cried harder – she thought Judy would ruin the bread. Judy continued to manhandle the dough, punching and stretching it. And she explained that the reason you knead dough is to get the air out of it so that it can rise again, even lighter. The bread turned out beautifully – to my

mom's surprise. And that evening, she and my father enjoyed love you could eat.

Today, we are called to return to the earliest forms of Christian community and sharing where, quite literally, bread is life, and breaking it is the creation of a new heaven and a new earth – right here and right now. Bread kneaded where it is needed breaks through darkness with light. When we break bread, we become the bread we knead. We offer ourselves to and for the world.

The theology of communion is difficult for some people who wonder what it truly means. We get confused about “transubstantiation” – the idea that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. Some people from other cultures and faith traditions even wonder if Christians are cannibals. No. The only people I know who believe in transubstantiation are Roman Catholic priests and a minority of their congregants.

Instead, I believe that the bread and the cup are symbols of a spiritual truth. The bread offers us sustenance for our lives – it is love you can eat. The wine offers us the blessing which enables us to share that profound love with others. In Middle Eastern cultures, when you share a cup of tea for the second time with someone, you become friends. The third time you share a cup, you become family. This is true with communion wine. It is in the cup that we become family, and we have responsibilities to one another. It is wine that connects and empowers us for service.

That is why I've chosen today's tradition word from Acts 2. It describes a community of believers who understood what it meant to share communion. This was the early church of the first century – described in this way:

“Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Acts 2:43-37

At another church I served, the bread for communion was baked or purchased by a volunteer. They had complete discretion on what they brought. One day, we have jalapeño corn bread. It didn't go over very well. Other days, we had cinnamon raisin bread. Or pull-apart cheesy bread. There were times we even had an old frozen hot dog bun because someone forgot the bread and we had to punt at the last minute. One day, as I was

breaking the bread during worship, my nose was filled with a pungent garlic dill smell. It was something that would make your mouth water and that you knew people around you for the next several hours would notice on your breath. After worship, I was in the kitchen washing my hands. I said, to no one in particular, “That was some great spicy but pungent garlic bread. A reply came from the person who had chosen this bread behind me, “Yes, I believe that when you eat the body of Christ, it ought to be something you remember!”

And so, my friends, that is what communion is for me – love you can taste and empowerment for service. In it, we find what we need in this world – hope for better days, lessons to build lives of purpose, a sense of community, and an awareness of the needs around us.

The smell of homemade bread still, for me, is a reminder of Grandma’s love. May the aroma of the bread and the cup always remind you that you are God’s own beloved and give you strength to carry on. Can you smell it? God is binding us together in one communion of love!