

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church
2368 Eggert Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150
831-1777

Fr. Molison's Sermon, Jesus – Bread of Life”

Sunday, August 9, 2009
Pentecost 10; Proper 14

A couple of months ago, Barbie brought home a different kind of bread than we've ever had before. The store calls it, "Soft Crusted Multigrain Bread." When I removed a slice from its wrapper, I immediately noticed the "heftiness" if you will, of this bread. It was solid bread; not one 90% air, 10% dough. This bread toasts well and I enjoy a slice or two with meals.

We live in a time of choices, whether it be to buy a new television, computer, an automobile, a simple tool... whatever the product, there seems to be more than one version of it. The same with bread. Today, there are all kinds of breads – some very good for you, others are not.

Thinking about that and the subject of today's Gospel passage, a question centering on the history of bread came to mind. So, I did some research and learned that bread was a staple of food in ancient Egypt more than 5,000 years ago. Loaves and rolls have been found in ancient Egyptian tombs.

Wheat has been found in pits where human settlements flourished some 8,000 years ago. What I found to be of particular interest is that no botanists or other scientists have found the wild form of grass from which wheat developed. Although a member of the grass family, wheat seems to have its own original DNA, if you will. Wheat appears to be an original food plant of God's creation. This says to me that God truly meant for wheat to be here for us human beings. And we humans found its values very early on in our short history on this planet.

And were their choices back in those days as to what breads could be made? Yes, there were many. The Greeks and Romans liked their bread white, a color that passed the many tests for quality. Those who believe that white bread is a modern fad, well I hate to be the one who bursts your bubble.

The Romans enjoyed several kinds of bread: oyster bread; cake bread; “hurry” bread; tin bread; Parthian bread, rich bread made with milk and eggs – indeed only for the rich; and bread made with cheese, but the all-time favorite bread was made from wheat.

Bread – an all-time favorite food of any meal, for it seems to satisfy one’s hunger; bread stays with you. No wonder bread is the symbol of a basic food to sustain life. Isaiah wrote in 3:1, “Bread is the stay of life.” Without bread, the ancient Israelites felt that their life was in danger.

So important was bread to the daily diet of the early Hebrew people, that the Lord, as recorded in Leviticus 23 and Numbers 15, commanded, yes, commanded the people to make a cereal offering – an offering of the first fruits of the harvest. The people were to make 12 cakes, called the “Bread of Presentation,” which were to be made from the finest flour ground from the first grain brought in at the beginning of the barley harvest.

This festival was called Shavout (Sha – voo’ –os) and was held in the late spring. Not all of us may be familiar with the term *first fruits* as used in connection with the cereal offering, but we are familiar with this term as recorded in St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, that Jesus, the Christ, is the *first fruits* of those to be resurrected.

One parallel that I find quite significant – others may say a mere coincidence – is that the Old Testament cereal offering, an offering of the first fruits of the harvest, was held in the late spring. What time of year did Jesus offer himself for us and die on the cross, and rose victoriously from the dead as the

first fruits of those who have fallen asleep? What time of year do we celebrate Easter? Isn't it late spring – around the beginning of April? This is the same time of year as the Old Testament cereal offering of the first fruits! Coincidence? I don't believe so! For who is the Lord of the Old Testament who commanded the cereal offering of the first fruits be offered in late spring? The Lord Christ.

As the Old Testament offerings of the first fruits marked the beginning of the wheat harvest, so the New Testament Jesus' offering of himself marked the beginning of the harvest of those who belong to him. Which brings us back to our subject of bread.

Bread, from earliest times, became the symbol of the staple food of life, the simple and universal means of subsistence. There are many things that man can live without, but not bread. The want of bread cannot be fully compensated for by supplying anything else. During the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, what did God give to the people of Israel to sustain them? Manna – bread. For the feeding of the 5,000, of all that could have been chosen by Jesus, bread was given to the multitude to eat.

The implication is: to live, one must have bread. Are you making a connection with the gospel reading yet?

I deliberately developed a history and the relative importance bread has in our lives with the hope that what Jesus said about himself will indeed impact mightily upon you. One of the most powerful verses in all of scriptures is what we heard read from the gospel of John, 6:35: Jesus said, "I AM (**Exodus3:14**) the Bread of Life." And further on, Jesus says, "I AM the living bread; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." No wonder the Jews were troubled with what Jesus just said. They knew that he just told them that He, Jesus, was indeed the Lord of the Old Testament. A revelation, a truth they denied.

To have eternal life, one must have Christ! For as Bread is to the body – a universal staple of sustenance; Christ is to the soul – the spiritual staple food for eternal life. To receive from Christ what he has to give us, we must feed on Him. I don't believe there is another word that expresses this thought with as much accuracy of meaning. We must feed upon Christ, His teachings, His ways, and His life.

St. Paul was approximately 47 years old when he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, 10 years before Mark wrote the first and oldest gospel. Paul wrote what is now believed to be the earliest written record of Christ's command to all believers about what we now call the "Last Supper." And we hear these words every time a priest celebrates the Holy Eucharist. Paul wrote, "And on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"

Jesus said, "I AM the bread of Life." Feeding on Christ not only sustains us, but also builds up our spiritual life as well. The food we receive from the earth cannot prevent age from stealing in on us. So, in spite of our daily bread, the body grows weaker and finally decays. The food which keeps us physically strong and healthy does not contain the elements necessary for the survival of our souls.

Partaking of the body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, is what Christ directed us to do, and this can only be done by receiving the Holy Eucharist. For those who say, "I am a good person. I believe in God. I do not need to go to church," they are in deep yogurt, for they have not received the "Bread of Life." Next week, you will hear read from John's Gospel this statement of Jesus, "Truly, truly. I say to you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." This is a powerful statement, one that ought to be taken quite seriously.

There is another form of the Body of Christ. It is the Church – you and I. We are many, but of one body. The Holy

Communion – in which all of us receive the same bread and drink of the same cup, demonstrates in a very impressive way the oneness of the members of the Church: oneness with each other; oneness with God. So, when the whole community of God receives the Holy Communion, receives the Bread of Life, the entire community is strengthened, not only collectively, but individually as well. For those who feed on the spiritual food will continue to grow in grace, knowledge, and in every spiritual gift.

During the prayer of consecration, Christ becomes present in the bread and wine, becomes a living sacrament. To the naked eye, there is no change.

In a few moments, we will be invited to come to the altar rail, to kneel and humbly raise our hands, asking in the fullness of faith, to be fed. And into our raised outstretched hands will be placed a piece of broken bread, broken somewhat like us, for we bring to the altar rail ourselves – frail, broken in spirit, in want and in need. For the burdens of this life can become very heavy indeed.

When the sacrament of bread is placed into your hands, look at it for a moment. We have a tendency to immediately and without much thought or contemplation of what we are holding, wolf the bread down and then look for the chalice. This morning, after the Bread of Life has been placed into your hands, I respectfully ask that you look at it for a moment. There before you will be the simple, basic element of life, bread. I respectfully ask the chalice bearers to give some time before presenting the chalice so that each person may for a moment spiritually ponder the gift that has been placed into their hands. What we will have in our hands is truly no ordinary piece of bread. What will be in the palm of your hand is *living bread*, bread that has within it the living presence of Christ, the bread that is a sign of the promise Christ made, the promise of eternal life.

The bread will be broken. The broken bread is a sign of the cost of that promise of eternal life. The broken bread is a sign of the love Christ has for you and for me. All of our brokenness, our frailties, weaknesses, are taken up into that living bread. Its effectiveness comes, not from seeing, but from taking it in – eating it. When we partake of that Bread, our bodies are physically fed, our souls spiritually fed. Strength is restored. Our sins forgiven. We can begin again - renewed, refreshed, strengthened. Our spiritual hunger - satisfied; our spiritual life - sustained. We grow spiritually. We stay on course. Praise God!

So, come, come to the banquet set for you. Believe, believe, accept and trust in receiving what Jesus has to offer. Eat, eat with your hearts, minds and with an understanding of the reconciling love Jesus Christ has for you – the Bread of Life.