

“Wonder Bread” March 4, 2007

San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

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My earliest memory of “wonder bread” is of that white fluffy light bread that as a child I saw advertised on TV. It was made into delicious peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. “Wonder bread” was supposed to be especially good for children, making strong bones and bodies. But wonder bread was a little more expensive than other breads, and my family didn’t have much money, and so we ate bread that was cheaper and not quite so wondrous.

Today even wonder bread isn’t supposed to be as good for us as breads with whole grains and more fiber. There are many varieties of bread, and bread is a major part of the diets of many people. When we smell the fragrance of homemade bread we often have associated feelings of warmth, comfort, and satisfaction. Bread represents life. To have bread to eat means we have an important part of what we need to go on living.

Robert Fulghum writes about going to kindergarten with his son, and he describes the careful ritual of snack time. Half the class were guests and half were the host. The table was carefully prepared and an object to think about was placed in the center of the table. When all the children were served, they sat quietly for a moment with hands folded until the teacher would say, “Let’s share.” And then each host took a cookie, broke it in half, and offered it to their friends, a ritual of sharing, caring, and friendship. Then as they ate their cookies, the children talked together about the “think about object” in the center of the table. For us in the Christian community, our “think about object” is Jesus. Once Jesus’ friends shared with him this ritual of communion their lives were never again the same and neither are ours.

What if the world was like that kindergarten class, and we took turns being the host and the guests. What if SHARING became the highest value of all countries. And imagine what it would be like, if like the children breaking their cookies in half, we broke in half all we had and offered it to others in a ritual of sharing, caring, and friendship.

Besides friendship and community, communion reminds us of promises made, of covenant. It’s an ancient promise going back to the Passover meal and to the covenant recorded in Hebrew scripture. Covenant means promises made between God and us and us and God. God has promised to love us always, no matter what. God’s love is a love that will not let us go.

This act, this ritual of sharing bread together within a community that promises to love one another is a very intimate thing to do. It is sometimes difficult to be church, and that's one reason we also share in confession before God and one another before we share the closeness of communion. We confess that we are human, that we get caught up in systems of sin, and that we need forgiveness.

How it is that communion evokes the presence of the Holy within this space and within us is very much a mystery. But many people can recall at least once when they took communion and extraordinary feelings were brought to surface. We may not know why but we've experienced that when we share this bread with those we depend on and love, powerful things happen to our souls. Ordinary bread is transformed into wonder bread!

I remember years ago watching a video where a man told the story of his son, Ross. Right after Ross graduated from law school, he and a friend celebrated by taking a 10-day trip to fish and camp in the Canadian Rockies. On the way back his friend was driving late at night while Ross slept in the back of the pickup truck. They were hit by a larger truck whose driver had been on a 14 hour drinking binge. Ross' neck was broken. He lived for 18 days but finally pneumonia filled his lungs and he died. The father tells of his attempts to deal with the tragedy of his son's death in various ways. He says that his son gave him a sourdough starter the Christmas before he died, and that one of the most helpful rituals of remembering and connecting to the life, energy, and vitality of his son was to take that sourdough starter and bake bread with it. The aliveness of rising bread, working the dough with his hands connected him with something of his son that was still very much alive. He'd been baking bread with that starter for 9 and 1/2 years. The simple act of baking bread had power to transform memories into reality.

Today we've been given a kind of sourdough starter called Holy Communion and through it the past and the future are collapsed into the present. Through this ritual the history, the vitality, the stories of faith of those before us in the long ago of our biblical tradition and in the not so distant past come to greet us in the present. And it is to this "starter" that Jesus gave to his followers long ago that we add the flour of our lives and bake a fresh loaf, a witness to the here and now, and a gift to the future. And we pray that our children and future generations will add the meal and substance of their lives and knead, bake, bless, break, and eat together. In this manner, Communion becomes a bread of continuous nourishment, a bread of hope, a bread of life, a bread of wonder. It is wonder bread for the people of God!

