

OPENING:

The restaurant in the *Museum of the Bible* in Washington, DC, is appropriately called, "Manna."

When the proprietors decided to call it that, they knew they would have to indeed serve "Manna" which was a problem because ethnobotanists are not really sure what it **is** exactly.

It's a lichen, or maybe a resin, or maybe a mushroom....

but regardless it's the tiniest of seeds,

and it's really labor intensive to produce

and it does not yield that much,

and it's apparently really hard to get because of supply issues in the Middle East.¹

It's apparently delicious though, and it has developed folkloric healing properties over the centuries,

In all, you can see why this very small, often discarded, very mysterious thing has all these allusions in the Biblical record to how God works in our lives.

The expression "Manna from Heaven" was already proverbial in Jesus' time, it referred to the Israelites and their journey in the Wilderness as part of the Exodus, and the remarkable provision by God's hand when they needed it most.

That's, I think what it means now also, even as we are divorced from the food itself, it means a windfall of a miraculous nature, perhaps after a long-standing prayer, or perhaps entirely unexpected, that provides sustenance and provision

MANNA

"Manna" literally means "what is it?"

Which is the same question that the crowd had for Jesus in our Gospel lesson.

"What is it?" *Mann-na*

Jesus gives another food-related response.... He says "I am the *Bread of Life*."

Which to us is, again, proverbial and familiar, so much so that we might lose what it means

You heard it last week: "I am the Bread of life"... you hear it this week:

"I am the Bread of Life." And you will hear the mantra again next week:

¹ Lefrak, Mikaela. (August 7, 2018) "Is this biblical food the next foodie fad? This chef thinks so." *Washington Post* (Magazine)
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/is-this-biblical-food-the-next-foodie-fad-this-chef-thinks-so/2018/08/03/1f2cafa2-8b60-11e8-8aea-86e88ae760d8_story.html?noredirect=on

“I am the Bread of life.”

The Lectionary has it this Summer almost as a hypnotic, meditative reminder. Perhaps then it just starts to sound normal.

BUT at the time, it was a startling claim that Jesus was making, Jesus knew it to be an explosive claim, his audience knew it, and it will activate a whole series of events that will lead to Jesus’ death.

BREAD

For now, though, let’s focus on the food part of it, and so here is your second culinary lesson for this morning from the Ancient Near East.

Today, we generally understand “bread” as a side dish, as an accessory in our meal planning. It’s full of carbohydrates and delicious. It’s abundant, bread is everywhere. So much so that people avoid it, because it has too much of those pernicious carbs and is not the healthiest thing in our 21st century context.

Back in Jesus’ day, however, it was different.

Bread was important, first as a source of calories and as a means of warding off hunger at a time when you expended energy doing everything.

It was also important because it was simply the delivery mechanism for the rest of the food at the meal. Remember the passage from the Last Supper (Mark 14.20) where Jesus identifies who is going to betray him by the person who dips his bread into the bowl with him.²

In a world with precious few utensils and unclean hands, it’s how you transferred food into your gullet.

So, it’s okay if when you hear “I am the Bread of Life’ that you picture a delicious bakery with hot loaves, or your grandmother’s house with home-made bread.

But that’s not the exact reference being made here, John is saying that

Jesus is the vessel that delivers life into our very selves,

Jesus is the mediator, the entrée, between humanity and God.

Jesus is the life-sustaining reality that points towards a larger life.

While “The Western mind allows us to think about Bread as an extra that we can take or leave, as optional as a dinner roll.”

we need to think about it as the homeless person reaching out for a slice of Wonder Bread at the shelter. “As beggar telling another beggar where the bread is.”³

Martin Luther, who could get as carnal and as crude as the saltiest short-order cook

² David Hull. “Homiletical Perspective” in Jarvis, Cynthia and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds. 2015. *Feasting on the Gospel- John* (Volume 1.) Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 197

³ Ibid.; Niles, D. T. 1951. *That They May Have Life*.

said it this way (in a different context) to his congregation:

“I wish that I could get you to pray the way that dog goes after meat”

“I wish that I could get you to pray the way that dog goes after meat”⁴

LITURGY:

Most of us will never understand hunger that way, and most of us won't revert to using bread as an all-purpose kitchen utensil.

But here are a couple ways that we understand Jesus as “the Bread of Life” in our own lives of faith, right under our mouths/ noses

The first comes from the prayer that we know best:

The 4th Petition in the Lord's Prayer reads: “Give us today our *daily* bread” and the Greek word there for “daily” is ἐπιούσιον and people really struggle with what that is supposed to mean.

That word is ONLY found in the New Testament in the Lord's Prayer. So it's anyone's guess what it means. If you are like me, you kind of say it: “Give us today our *daily* bread” and don't think about it.

If you get the experts in there, they think it should really be translate/ read it as “super-essential” bread or “super substantial.” bread

Give me the bread that I cannot live without, give me the bread that will last forever. Which is an entirely different meaning than “daily”

I invite you to try to wrap your head around that as you say the Lord's Prayer today and into the future. This was the prayer that Jesus instructed us to say, why did he use that word, an entirely new one at that, what does “daily bread” mean?

The second way to think about the “bread of life” is related to that, and it's again something we do every week. When we come to the table with our hands outstretched, and receive the bread, this hunk of the *Great Harvest* or the antiseptic wafer... my guess is that the reason that you do it, is that you need it and that it fills you up. That that morsel of bread means to you what it has meant to folks for centuries, that it is the “bread of life” that will get you through the week, that you feel changed as you walk back to your pew. That it both somehow satisfies your hunger, and also somehow provokes it. That it leaves with you the best taste in your mouth, but also wanting more and more.

The fancy term for that understanding is the “foretaste of the heavenly banquet” that

⁴ Quoted in Willimon, William. “Homiletical Perspective.” in 2008. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*), edited by David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 333.

you are previewing, by gathering around a table with a Christian community in this life, we get a glimpse of what the grandest of meals will taste like in the future. It will taste like bread and wine. It will taste like the humblest meal, “daily bread” but also one that is supersubstantial and superessential.

CONCLUSION

This is both the basics and the PhD level of Eucharistic theology.

Anyone can understand it and it will take you a lifetime to do so.

Luckily, Jesus did not say “take and understand”... He said “take and eat.”⁵

I will end by sharing a story about a conversation between two writers Flannery O’Connor and Mary McCarthy. Flannery O’Connor was a devout Catholic, rare in the writerly set, and they were visiting her in her home in Georgia and somehow the conversation turned on the Eucharist, and O’Connor, being Catholic, was somehow supposed to defend it.

The other writer in the conversation said that when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the 'most portable' person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, “Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.” And then she later said “That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable.”⁶

The “bread of life” absolutely should be visceral and anatomical and incarnate, to use another churchy word, in your very self.

Jesus demands to be that close to you, to pass through you even

Not just as an idea, but the very essence of what keeps us alive.

AMEN

⁵ Lewis, C. S. 1977. *Joyful Christian: 127 Readings*. New York: MacMillan. 82.

⁶ Quoted in Elie, Paul. 2004. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* - An American Pilgrimage. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 176 (498n)