

The Bread of Life | John 6:51-58

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We baptized our first child when he was six months old.
my spouse and I had talked a lot about the when and why
Of getting him baptized when he was a baby,
but didn't talk much about
When and how Francis would receive communion
For the first time.

In our church,
All baptized Christians are officially welcome to receive communion in our liturgies.
On a case by case basis,
some Episcopal churches go further
and say that all who desire to receive communion are welcome.

But we do leave the decision
About when young children who've been baptized
start receiving communion
to caregivers.
Francis was baptized at six months old,
and, well, as his caregivers,
we were focused on other things,
Like teaching him how to eat solid food at all.

But when Francis was a year and a half old,
I was coordinating a dinner church service at St. Thomas' in Dover.
A few Saturday nights per month,
We set round tables and prepared a simple meal.
We began with prayers and scripture,
We heard the gospel and served dinner.
As we ate together, we broke open the meaning of the gospel for each of us,
Reflecting in conversation and sharing our lives.
And then we celebrated the eucharist, serving each other standing at our tables.
Nathan and Francis had come to join us
on this particular night.

To honor the actual dinner we offered,
We used real bread, not communion wafers, at this service.
As we passed the plate around our table,
The bread was offered to me first.
I ate it, and crossed myself,
And turned to offer it to the person next to me,
Who happened to be Nathan.

And Nathan was holding Francis.
And as I held the plate out to him,
Saying “the body of Christ,”
Francis saw bread!
He grabbed a piece,
And looked at it,
And then looked at us.
It seemed like maybe God and Francis were the ones in charge of this moment,
Not us!
And the moment arrived, without us as his parents even knowing it!

We’re deeper in the spiral of the bread of life discourse,
This extended meditation in the gospel of John.
We’re circling around and around
the themes of: **who** Jesus is
And **how** Jesus loves us
by feeding us with his own self.
By offering us the very bread of life.

Jesus is the meal and the host.
We’ve acknowledged our hunger
And now we hear more about what the meal is,
And what it does for us.
What it does *with* us.
That eating the bread of heaven -
Taking in Jesus’ offering of his own self,
His own, whole life -
Draws us into the life of God
And the kingdom of God.
We hear that eating the bread of heaven
Brings God into our own bodies,
and therefore into our lives
In a literal and new way.
Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Thomas Merton wrote a short book about the Eucharist
And the bread of life discourse
Called “The Living Bread.”
In the prologue,
he writes about a fuller meaning of the belief
That Jesus insists we must have
In order to have life.
He writes that believing in Christ is much more
than intellectual agreement or assent that something is true:
It’s wholeheartedly welcoming christ in,

and wanting to move further into the life of God
and life *with* God.

For the Christian,
The Eucharist is what does this.
Sharing the bread and the wine is an invitation
To a profound yes:
A yes to the whole of Jesus' life and death and life again,
A yes for our hearts, our bodies, and our minds.
Welcoming Christ in,
And also revealing our desire to move closer in,
To be held by
and within
the God *that* loves us beyond explaining.

Two weeks ago, I shared a bit
about the spiritual hunger I experienced
during my crisis of faith.
After my failed attempts at being an atheist and even an agnostic,
I started to dip my toes in some new-to-me spiritual practices
And other kinds of worship,
But it was Eucharistic communities that brought me back:
In the middle of my searching,
Episcopal faith communities repeatedly welcomed me in
and fed me.
The parish on the town green with fancy stained glass
that welcomed crying babies and people who were homeless.
The Monday evening dinner church
that fed a ragtag crew communion and dinner.
The fancy Anglo-Catholic parish
that demonstrated veneration on a whole new level.
Whoever I was, however I showed up,
I was welcomed, fed, and included in the building up of the body of Christ...
Often sating my spiritual and physical hunger at the same time.
It turned out that
knowing that my body -
This body, with this body's history and this body's present:
would be loved and welcomed through being literally fed
With no questions asked -
Was what I needed before I could be spiritually *full*.

When my toddler grabbed that chunk of communion bread,
My husband and I were both taken aback,
And looked at each other
the way that people who've been married or partnered for a long time do,

Desperately trying to have a full, nuanced conversation through eye contact alone,
About how we were going to respond to this.

I took in Francis holding the bread in his hand,
The body of Christ,
Trying to figure out if he was going to eat it or not,
If we were going to let this happen.
And I realized,
My child was reaching for the eucharist!
In what world was I going to take it away from him!

I whispered to Nathan,
“You have to say the words, cause I’m going to cry!”
So Nathan said “the body of Christ, the bread of heaven”
As Francis ate the chunk of bread with no ceremony.

I did cry.
Some people thought I was crying because I hadn’t *wanted* him to receive yet.
But I cried because the moment was so beautiful,
And simple,
And clear.
Francis saw bread on a plate,
A plate we were sharing.
It was dinnertime.
He felt safe, he felt loved,
And he was hungry.
How often children understand this part of what we do at church
before they understand almost anything else -
how those who love them,
feed them.
that feeding and loving go hand in hand.
And when they’ve been fed,
They learn how to share the food they have with others.

God cares about our bodies, our hearts, and our souls.
And maybe our bodies, our hearts, and our souls
are not as separate as we were made to believe.
Maybe nourishment is nourishment -
and to draw lines between these categories is missing the point.

The gospel writer offers us so many beautiful words
About the bread of life
Over these few weeks.
Passages that are worth listening to,
And chewing on,

Meditating over.

Let's take the words seriously,

But not get lost in them.

*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me,
and I in them.*

Instead, let these words

lead us back to the table

Where Jesus simply wants to feed us.

To build our bodies up into his body,

Whole and complete.