

Becoming Bread<sup>1</sup>  
John 6:48-59  
Philippians 2:1-8  
Chilmark Community Church  
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"I am the bread of life." "I am the living bread." Familiar words for sure. So familiar that we don't often stop to ask ourselves "What did he mean by that?"

Many years ago, right after we first moved here, I worked a couple mornings a week in a friend's bakery. Each evening, my friend would enter her bakery kitchen to begin the bread making process.

A huge Hobart mixer stood on the floor at one end of the kitchen. The bowl of the mixer was big enough to bathe in.

The flour went in the bowl by the pound rather than by the cup. When a recipe called for eggs, they went in by the dozen rather than one or two at a time. The Hobart did the heavy work of kneading the mixture into a thick, sturdy dough. The dough was then transferred into large 5 gallon buckets with loose fitting lids to raise in the refrigerator overnight.

I happened to stop in early one morning as the dough was coming out of the fridge. After a slow rise overnight, the dough had puffed up and over the top of the bucket and was wearing the bucket lid like a hat. There was a hint of plump white arms reaching out and over the rim of the bucket - - all very reminiscent of the Pillsbury Doughboy. As my friend and I talked about the way she worked with the dough to get it to rise properly, I couldn't help noticing that she was describing a relationship that required a lot of attentiveness on her part. Bread dough has a life of its own. There were days when the rising dough would kind of pull her along and she would just hope that she could keep up with it. On other days she would have to shepherd the dough along to get it to rise properly. The bread was a living organism. Watching Beth bake bread was watching a living relationship in action.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. I am the living bread that came down from heaven...whoever eats this bread will live forever...and the bread I will give for the world is my flesh." When he used language like offering his flesh and blood, many of his Jewish listeners heard his words literally and were deeply disturbed and angry about what they thought they heard. Jewish kosher food law forbids the consumption of flesh with the blood still in it.

2000 plus years later, we are able to think more easily in terms of metaphors. When we step back a little from the literal image of Jesus offering his flesh and blood, what we discover is that Jesus was offering a way of entering into relationship - - a very deep and intimate relationship with him and his teaching. We are better able to understand that in offering himself in the metaphor of bread, he was inviting us to internalize his way of being - allowing his way of being to fill us the way a good loaf of homemade bread fills us - - allowing him to enter us through our hearts, to nourish our minds and enliven our souls. Through the metaphor of bread, Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> From the title of the book Becoming Bread by Gunilla Norris Bell Tower New York 1993



taught about the intimate relationship he wanted with and for his friends and followers. He wanted to live in them.

His invitation to partake of him as Living Bread frightened some of the people who heard him. Sometimes it frightens me!! I do not know where my life will go when I allow myself to enter into this relationship – if I allow the Living Christ to course through my veins, and shape my thinking and my doing and my being. Who would I become? Who would you become? What might we become together as the body of Christ?

Father Richard Rohr and colleague, Cynthia Bourgeault, invite us to understand Jesus as a bringer of the transformation of consciousness - - a renewal of the mind. Into the violence and oppression of the Roman domination of Israel at the time, he brought a message of nonviolence and compassion and forgiveness - - a message of a kind of self emptying love in the service of the other.

The world we live in today is so deeply and painfully fractured. We are in a time when the atmosphere we live in is fraught with suspicion, mistrust, enmity - - - us and them - - - We are in danger of losing sight of the knowledge that humankind is created in the divine image - - and there are no exceptions to that. The needs of the ego run rampant and our humanity is diminished.

Jesus invited the transformation of the mind that sees the world broken into opposing fragments and enmity - - into a mind that sees the world as a whole with many diverse parts - - a transformation from the mind that sees life in terms of either/or - - us/them to the mind that embraces the discomfort of polarities and paradox - - a mind that can hold the brokenness as a whole and hold it in peace - - to see the world as both/and - - - as us together.

Paul speaks of this mind when he writes to the Philippian Church:

2 If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> **Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...who emptied himself ...**

The first Nations Indigenous Translation puts it this way: *As you walk the road with the Chosen One, have you gained from him courage for the journey? Have you found comfort in his love? Do you share together in his Spirit? Has his tenderness and mercy captured your heart? If so, then have the same kinds of thoughts. Love with one heart. Join together in one Spirit. And walk side by side on one path. But when you do these things, make sure you do them for the right reasons. Do not let selfish ways take you down a path of bragging or trying to make yourself look better than others. Instead let humility be your guide as you honor others above yourself. Each of you should look to the needs of others, not just to your own.*

Back to my baker friend. There were times when I walked into the bakery just as the bread was coming out of the oven. When the bread was cool enough to handle, out would come a tub of



butter and some good cheese. We would break off slabs of warm bread and we would eat and share a few moments of our life journey together. We would laugh - - sometimes we would cry - - we would offer each other strength and encouragement and support for whatever we needed to accomplish that day. The sharing of bread, the sharing in our love for one another, the sharing of our respective journeys, always sent me back into my day refreshed, renewed and joyful. My friend no longer bakes professionally and those yeasty, buttery moments are a thing of the past. But the memory of those early morning feasts still sustains me. In the mystery of shared bread, we had become bread for one another.

The mystery of shared bread. Jesus offered himself as bread for our lives so that we might become bread for one another. But part of the mystery is we do not feed on the bread of Christ for ourselves alone. We receive the gift of bread in community so that we might be nurtured and sustained and strengthened for the purpose of becoming bread for others. This is what “church” is about - - it is about coming together to find strength and nourishment for ourselves so that we can become strength and nourishment for others - - for the world. This is not a romantic notion. Sometimes it can be really messy – just as literally breaking bread can be messy. It has to do with accepting and caring for and supporting each other – listening with sensitive care – mourning with each other - - loving without condition – being Christ-the-bread for one another. In a small church in the center of a small community, we actually know quite a lot about how this works. It isn’t glamorous. Sometimes it takes a lot of patience and forbearance. It isn’t even always pleasant – but being bread for each other - - sharing life with each other is what we are called to do. It’s that simple - - - and it is that mysterious. In her little book entitled “Becoming Bread” Gunilla Norris has written these words: ***We are united through sharing...our lives are made new...meaningful. “Take. Eat. This is my body,” said Jesus when he broke bread at the last supper. Then he gave his life for us. Behind all communion is the knowledge that we must give our lives to each other, for each other. And when we do, we can mourn, we can trust, we can forgive, we can treasure, we can even face our deaths. In sharing, the meaning of our lives is given back to God. The One who gives. The One who receives. The One who is.***<sup>2</sup>

As we share in the sacrament of communion today, may the symbols of the bread and the cup confront us with the mystery of the invitation to intimate relationship with the Living Christ....and may the symbols challenge us to become living bread for one another and as we become bread for one another, may we also become bread for the world. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Norris Becoming Bread p. 67