

“Wonder Bread”

I love bread. All kinds of bread—wheat, rye, pumpernickel, sourdough, baguettes, challah, pita, focaccia, naan. And don't forget sweet breads such as panettone, stollen and cinnamon buns. I am not sure how I got my love of bread. Like most Americans of my generation I grew up on bland, mushy white bread. The kind of bread that “Helps build strong bodies 12 ways,” but has no taste at all.

The first time I became aware that there was bread other than white bread, was when I went grocery shopping with my grandma. She bought this weird stuff that looked like it had dirt in it and then was burnt. The package read “100% whole wheat bread.” I remember asking my mother why grandma bought that stuff, because it looked like it must taste bad.

The first time I tried “exotic” bread was when I had cocktail pumpernickel. The slices were tiny and someone had spread cream cheese with chives on it. I thought it was the fanciest thing I had ever eaten. I begged my mom for a loaf of this special bread and the cream cheese. What a delight it was.

While I have enjoyed learning about and trying different types of bread ever since, there was really only one bread that I ever longed to have, and I had to wait twelve and a half years to get a taste of it—communion bread.

I grew up in the Southern Baptist church. As in most Christian traditions I was not allowed to receive communion until I had been baptized. We did not have infant baptism, but believer's baptism; that meant I could not be baptized until I had an experience of the Holy Spirit. That was not to happen until I was twelve years old.

Every time we had communion I had to sit it out. What made it even harder was that we did not come forward to receive Communion in the Baptist Church. Instead plates of bread (tiny cubes of white bread that were impossibly uniform in their squareness) were passed among the congregants. That meant that the plate had to pass through my hands but I could not take any. I was sorely tempted, but I did not take it. I longed desperately to receive that tiny piece of white bread. Grape juice in little shot glasses was also part of communion, but it did not hold the same allure for me as the bread did.

What was it that made me want that ordinary little cube of white bread so much? It certainly wasn't the taste. That kind of bread has no taste, and it was so small I could swallow it without chewing it. Part of the allure was that eating it meant I belonged, that I was a member not an outsider. But I don't think that was the real attraction, because drinking the juice was also a sign of belonging and I was not drawn to the juice.

For the last month we have been reading the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus again and again affirms that he is the bread of heaven. But the heavenly bread that is Jesus is not the same heavenly bread that God sent to nourish the Hebrews during the Exodus from Egypt. As Jesus says in today's reading, they ate that bread and died. The bread did not kill them, but it could only sustain life for a little while. The bread that is Jesus is different. Eating that bread, just as we will in a few minutes, causes us to live.

Jesus has been hammering at this metaphor for verse after verse first with the crowds, then with "The Jews" (those who did not believe in Jesus as the Christ). Although at this point in the narrative he seems to be speaking to everyone including you and me. To make the metaphor more powerful and perhaps unbelievable he tells his listeners that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. This sounds like cannibalism. Once more his listeners take him literally and wonder aloud how they can eat his flesh and drink his blood.

But that is the way the Gospel John goes. Jesus uses metaphors such as "being born from above," "living water," "true vine," and "bread of life" that vex his listeners. They are like children who do not understand metaphor or hyperbole. Thus they get stuck in the incredulity of the statement instead of listening for the more important image that Jesus is trying to put across.

As for me those little disks of wheat or cubes of white bread have always been precious and life giving. Since the day that I was first allowed to eat the bread and drink the cup I have felt a special connection to this food. It was also the experience of receiving communion that at age 29 changed my life, and little did I know it started me on the trajectory that has brought me to the priesthood and to Emmanuel.

This bread, as Jesus said earlier in this chapter, is the bread of life. Eating this bread satisfies a different kind of hunger. It is not the hunger of the belly, but the hunger of the heart. That hunger is the longing we have to be in unity with something greater than ourselves. This is a hunger to be filled with the Divine and to become one with the Divine. That is the food we long for; bread that is life changing and life sustaining. It truly is bread of wonder.