

How Bread Works

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Sources: Mark 6.30-44

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

1st Corinthians 8.1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists’, and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

One of the members of the lectionary group said you really need a diagram to figure out what Paul is saying in this reading. The context is multicultural, multi-faith first-century Corinth, where the social life of the wealthy elite revolves around banqueting and other food-events centred on various temples. Meat offered to idols would be prominent at such gatherings. Paul is addressing those who clearly understand that because other gods do not exist, eating meat offered to them is ethically inconsequential – it doesn’t matter at all. But apparently there are other members of the community, perhaps less well educated, less sophisticated. For them, eating such meat is a step away from Christian faith, back toward superstition and idolatry. Paul’s point is that he is going to avoid eating that meat, and his readers should too. The knowledge and self-confidence of the stronger Christians is definitively trumped by their ethical obligation toward the other members of the community. There is a hint of *noblesse oblige* that our egalitarian ears may find off-

putting, but his bottom line is that helping to build up each others' faith is a critical part of the Christian life. Paul insists that the life of the community is enhanced by the recognition of differences among the Christians, and by efforts to value each other.

Food offered to idols isn't a pressing question for us at Bloor Street United, in Toronto, in 2012, but Paul's notion of active respect for the way other people are is still the basis of a healthy Christian community. Bread baking Sunday is a great example of it.

For some, today's efforts in the kitchen and beyond are just right – the essence of Christian practice. It is concrete, it is friendly, it is productive. Bread-baking allows the generations to meet one another and talk, to get to know each other in ways that can never happen as we sit side by side in the pew. And then later as we take the bread they have baked and offer it forward to friends and family and strangers in the world, we make a tangible contribution to the wellbeing of others. Some of the bread will go to the weekly supper tonight at Emmanuel–Howard Park United Church, where Stephen and Amanda and their children participate every week. Last year some went to an office coffee break at the ROM. Another loaf to a shut-in neighbour. I seem to recall one went to Hamilton. And at least two loaves that I know of were passed along with a bottle of wine – very Eucharistic! Bread itself works as such a potent symbol of hospitality and caring, such a lovely combination of the utterly practical and the delectable, that it does seem to embody our best aspirations as Christians.

For some, though, in this kind of event at a church, bread also works as an uncomfortable reminder of the immense and discouraging problem of hunger in the world. In that sense, it seems that bread-baking Sunday is not quite practical enough, and it makes some people impatient. The contribution that our 100 loaves can make to hunger in the city, much less the world, is so small. For some, Christianity is primarily a call to social action, an imperative to a much more forceful response – whether in advocacy, education or institutional reform. For some, Christian spirituality is best expressed through political activism. Getting informed and involved in a myriad of 'bread' issues is the way many Christians live out their faith – work on world hunger questions, on GMOs, on farm policy, on the funding of agricultural research development initiatives. Take your pick – we know that there is endless scope for involvement and effort. In some quarters there is dismay that our United Church has lost some of its vigour on matters of social justice – and within the church there has been severe criticism of what is seen as a retreat from our historic role as champion of the poor and the disenfranchised. It is a source of disappointment and disapproval

that the church's voice seems to have been muted. In that context, 100 loaves of bread on a Sunday morning can seem a bit lame. For these folks, the essence of Christian practice is action for radical social change, and whatever takes us away from that is a distraction.

There is another group in the contemporary church that just gets tired and overwhelmed when confronted by the traditional social justice agenda. You might have heard a former minister at Bloor Street say 'It's the United Church, not the United Way'. People who see it this way are not against social activism as such, in fact many of them are particularly active and highly effective in various 'bread' issues, but they stress that the main purpose of the church is to offer sustenance to the life of the interior. To mine the treasures of an ancient faith tradition, in ways that will bring new insight to the life we live now. In contrast to other social and political agencies, they argue, the church has a unique vocation to spiritual nurture. This is our special area. In a frenetic and materialistic society, the church is called to model an alternative – to value quiet, to affirm slowness, to practice devotion to a reality larger and deeper than the hurly-burly of politics and busy-ness. We are called to pray, to sing, to reflect.

Social activism for justice, quiet reflection and prayer, companionship over a hot stove, or donut-fryer – you can see that Christians are still at odds about what is most important. About what comes first. About how to proceed. As individuals we struggle between the need to be fed and the need to be up and doing. As a community, these different perspectives may give rise to mutual disdain and conflict.

We see the same dynamic by the Sea of Galilee in the passage that David read. Jesus and the disciples have been so busy with healing and teaching that they need a break. Jesus himself affirms the importance of time apart, time spent *not* serving. Yet when they get there, the crowd presses, and he agrees to carry on with the work. He even recruits the disciples to feed the crowds. But then, see what happens. The miracle of loaves and fishes is not a magic trick, but a byproduct of Jesus' instruction to the crowd. Stop them milling around, he says to the disciples, just sit them down in an orderly way. They sit. He prays. Oh, it turns out that we do have enough to eat. Actually, more than enough. Throughout his ministry Jesus manages the dance between activism and devotion, between the nurture of individuals and the radical critique of structures. He says, I am the Bread of Life, and this is how bread works.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that in a Christian community, it is more important to build one another up than it is to be the one with the best ideas and most advanced

insight. *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*, he says. As long as we forbear with one another, our different approaches to bread can work together rather than causing tension. Focus on action, focus on community, and focus on devotion will converge to strengthen all three. Indeed, in a setting where all three approaches are affirmed, we can hope that action for justice will be sustained both by the encouragement of the community and the care of the soul. Community life will be strengthened by the spiritual sturdiness of the members and their dedication to a just world. Souls will be fed by work and by conviviality as well as by prayer. As the lovely aroma wafts toward us, we give thanks for bread – bread for the community, bread for the world, and bread for the soul.

Amen.