

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 14
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
August 8, 2021
1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:1-8
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:35, 41-51

Baking Good Bread

Soon after I was installed as the thirty-fourth rector of St Paul's many years ago on June 5, 2021, Ken Bagge and his friend Gayle welcomed Becky and me to Key West with the gift of some sourdough starter. And not only the starter itself, but also every single thing one needs in order to properly tend the starter and bake delicious sourdough bread: bread bowl, baking pans, utensils, flour, yeast, all of it. An amazing and thoughtful gift.

In recent weeks, Becky has taken up bread baking, something she did years ago in Atlanta. Following Gayle's precise and comprehensible instructions, she has been turning out truly delicious loaves of different varieties of sourdough. Some with cinnamon and raisins and a delicate glaze on top; some plain; some with whole wheat or granola added to experiment with texture and flavor and nutrients.

The smell of bread baking in the oven is a delightful aroma to encounter, isn't it? Good dough prepared just so turned into something satisfying and tasty.

And success or failure in bread baking really comes down to simple details: what goes into the dough makes a difference, for sure. And mixing the ingredients well matters. And then kneading the dough, working with it matters. If one of these three things—ingredients, mixing, or kneading, is off, out of kilter, not in alignment, the bread may still smell great while baking, but it might not actually be edible.

Attention to simple but crucial details means the difference between a delight for the senses that satisfies our longings and the baked equivalent of a hockey puck.

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Today is the third of five consecutive Sundays when, in the midst of our year with the gospel of Mark, we have gospel passages from the sixth chapter of the gospel of John. And they're all about bread, one way or another.

We began two weeks ago with the feeding of at least 5,000 people beside the lake we know as the Sea of Galilee, followed by Jesus walking across that same lake to catch up with his disciples as they were rowing a boat back across the lake.

Last week we encountered the beginning of Jesus' great discourse of bread that goes on for nearly the remainder of this sixth chapter of John.

Today we have again Jesus' declaration in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life," and his repetition of it in verse 48, and also this variation of it in verse 51: "I am the living bread that came down [or that is coming down] from heaven."

"I AM the bread of life" is the first of the metaphorical "I AM" sayings of Jesus in John's gospel. The others, in the order they appear are, "I AM the light of the world;" "I AM the door;" "I AM the good shepherd;" "I AM the resurrection and the life;" "I AM the way, the truth, and the life;" and "I AM the true vine."

These kinds of statements by Jesus the Christ about himself are only found in John's gospel. In John we encounter the Easter Jesus, the resurrected Christ: alive again, triumphant, confident. This is why we always read John in Eastertide. And this is why we have John during this time of year in the northern hemisphere, when the summer is thick and ripe, when the growing season is ending and produce of many kinds is at its peak.

"I AM." The revealed name of God in Hebrew scripture, the first testament.

"I AM." Not "I WAS," not "I WILL BE," but "I AM." In the present reality of the living God, past, present, and future are held together. When we grasp this reality our awareness expands, and we are raised to a different level of consciousness. For this reason, a better translation of "I will raise them up on the last day" is actually "the I AM will raise you up this very day"—to that different way of understanding who God is in the world, if we are able to receive that good news.

In the responses of the Jewish community's old-guard religious leaders to Jesus' declaration, "I AM the bread of life," we see that his use of language equating himself with God provokes a hostile reaction. We can understand it. He was basically declaring himself divine. They understood it as blasphemy.

Who does he think he is? This is Joseph's boy. We know his mama and daddy. Where does he get off saying that he has come from beyond time?

Jesus responds to them with more statements that are completely incomprehensible to people who are stuck inside an old system—including us, if we are stuck and clinging to models and methods that no longer work.

Jesus says that God's own self, the I AM, is the living bread that comes from beyond time. He says whoever eats of this bread will live forever. And he says that the bread that the I AM gives for time and eternity is Jesus the Christ's very flesh.

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The old-guard religious establishment within the wider Jewish community in first-century Palestine are not the only ones complaining in today's readings. The prophet Elijah is the focus of our first reading today. He is on the run for his life. He has done what he understood he was supposed to do, and then Queen Jezebel sent a messenger to say that she would make sure he was killed just like all the prophets of Ba'al, the god of her choice, had been killed.

Elijah had been working hard on God's behalf, remaining steadfast in his faith and in his work. And he had done so for a long time. He was tired, and he didn't think his efforts were making any difference. When we encounter him in today's reading he is just about to hold a magnificent pity party for himself.

He was not only tired; he was exhausted. He was in need of a HALT. Do you know this acronym from our siblings in 12-step programs? H-A-L-T. Don't let yourself get too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. When we are one or more of those things, stuff usually starts to go sideways.

Elijah needed a HALT. God provided him that interval. He slept a long time. And then an angel woke him up and told him to get up and eat. He went back to sleep for another long stretch. And the angel awakened him once more and said, "Get up and eat; otherwise the journey will be too much for you." In the strength of that much needed rest and those two much needed meals, Elijah journeyed for forty days, renewed and replenished and once more able to carry on with the work God had given him.

"Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." So said the angel to Elijah.

Is your journey of late feeling like too much for you?

What are you eating? Consuming? Ingesting? What are you taking into yourself, your body, your mind?

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Turning back to bread once more, to the importance of ingredients and mixing and kneading the dough, the second reading from the epistle to the Ephesians tells us some things not to put in our dough: “bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice....” These things have no place in our diet, no place in our bread recipe, and no place in our life together. And it does say earlier in the passage from Ephesians to “be angry and sin not”. So, when we feel anger, we should feel it. And let it pass; not hold onto it. Not feed on it. Rather, we should feed on the living bread, the very presence and availability of God that gives us life and makes this life worth living.

What we should put into our dough, individually and collectively as a community, are kindness and love and mercy. “Be kind to one another,” Ephesians says, “tenderhearted, forgiving one another.”

This is the kind of bread we want to bake, modeled on Christ Jesus, himself the living bread, sent by the I AM, who loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God.