



Anniversary Bread

JEFF WILD

Anniversaries of congregations are memorable for many reasons. A favorite son or daughter of the congregation returns home and preaches a wonderful sermon. Former pastors, spouses, and children are invited to the celebration and warmly received. A special meal is prepared and served. The bishop of the synod and other special guests offer congratulatory and affirming words to the assembly. Above all else, the worship is well attended, the music is joyful, and the congregation is genuine in giving thanks to God. Anniversary celebrations generate warm, lasting memories and gratitude to God.

Advent Lutheran Church in Madison, Wisconsin, experienced most of these things when members celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the congregation in November 2011. It was a blessing and honor for me to be the congregation's pastor when this milestone was celebrated, and I have lasting memories, especially of the fourteen loaves of bread that were artfully placed and remained on the altar for the thanksgiving worship. All this bread brought to mind Jesus' feeding of the five thousand and, closer to home, all the people who were fed at this table through the years. At our anniversary service, only one of the loaves was consecrated, broken, and shared with those communing.

GROWING BREAD

Scripture testifies that God's people have bread stories to remember and tell.

Growing and harvesting the wheat, grinding the flour, and breaking the bread bring a different meaning to its use in Holy Communion and in a congregational meal. Christ is discovered to be truly present in the sacrament but also throughout this process.

These are good stories because they are God stories. The story of fourteen loaves of bread at an anniversary celebration begins with the children's garden that was first tilled in the spring of 2001. The children's garden is a partnership between high school and adult members of the congregation and elementary school-aged children who attend an eight-week summer camp at a nearby community center. The two groups garden together two mornings a week. In spite of the differences in demographics of these two groups, they were united as gardeners, sharing the tasks and enjoying the fruits of their labor.

Because of the success of the garden ministry with the formation of meaningful relationships and bountiful harvests, our garden grew until our ambitions to grow more produce outstripped our capacity to keep up with the weeding, watering, and harvesting. Rather than letting a portion of the garden return to a field of weeds, we decided to try our hand at growing a crop of winter wheat in the fall of 2010.

I consulted with the superintendent at the University of Wisconsin Agricultural Center. He explained that the crew finished planting wheat a couple of weeks earlier and it was getting late in the season, but he had about twenty pounds of wheat if we wanted to try planting. The timing corresponded with our confirmation instruction on the Lord's Prayer. On the Wednesday evening we reflected on the petition "Give us this day our daily bread," I led the kids outside, lined them up at the edge of the garden, and instructed each of them to reach into the bag, grab a handful of seed, and cast it into the darkness toward the middle of the garden. We repeated this exercise standing from the edges of the other three sides of the plot.

I had my doubts that the wheat would take root and grow. We waited through the winter months and when the garden began to green up in the spring this plot was noticeably greener. But I didn't know if we were looking at wheat or weeds. I asked Tom Matthews, who grew up on a farm, to take a look and he concluded it was weeds. I was ready to till it under and plant vegetables, but someone cautioned me to wait and see. Surprisingly, Tom was wrong, and a field of wheat was springing up.

By the Fourth of July, we did have amber waves of grain, and we began to plan for the harvest. I reached out to my cadre of consultants and asked them how we go about harvesting a field of wheat by hand. Much to my surprise, the only way people knew how to harvest wheat was sitting on a tractor pulling a combine behind! I was struck by this loss of simplicity of harvesting wheat and expressed my wonder in a sermon questioning to what extent our lives are more complicated than they need to be.

John Rowe approached me after worship and said, "I think I know someone who can teach us how to harvest the wheat—Kebeh Gorvego." Kebeh worked alongside other women in the rice fields on farms in Liberia before moving to the United States. After worship the following Sunday, Kebeh taught a group of about thirty children and adults how to harvest wheat. Swiftly and gracefully, Kebeh cut

the stalks with the flick of the paring knife in her hand and dropped them into a large flat woven basket. Then she danced in her bare feet on the wheat to separate the kernels from the stems. She lifted the basket from the ground and tossed the contents of the basket into the air. A gentle wind carried the chaff away as seed fell back into the basket. Someone commented, "So this is how it was done in biblical times!" After two weeks, all the sifting and winnowing was completed and we were proud of our two five-gallon buckets of wheat.

Next, we had to learn how to grind the wheat into flour. Emily Wixson lent her heavy-duty hand grinder, and after experimenting we learned that the wheat needed to pass through the grinder three times before it was a consistency to use in baking bread. Our confirmation retreat in the fall was devoted to the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Every student took a turn at the crank to grind some flour. The kids ground twenty-five pounds of flour and others were gathered in the weeks ahead to grind twenty-five more.

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The flour was distributed to seven members of the congregation who enjoy baking bread. They were assigned the task of first experimenting with the wheat flour and then contributing two loaves of bread for the anniversary celebration. One of the unexpected benefits was that most of the seven people tested their bread out on my wife Nan and me. The phone rang late one Sunday evening and I heard Nan say, "Sure, come on over." She told me one of the bakers was on her way with a loaf of bread fresh out of the oven. A few minutes later the doorbell rang, our dog barked, and I opened the door to greet this baker dressed in her pajamas and bathrobe, holding out a loaf of bread covered by a towel. It was a delightful moment and delicious gift.

How many Lutherans does it take to make a loaf of bread? By my calculations, about one hundred children, teens, and adults were involved, from confirmation students sowing the seed to the seven experienced bread bakers. How long does it take for Lutherans to make a loaf of bread? By my estimate, it took 50–75 hours over a thirteen-month period.

CONSIDERING BREAD

Just as the bread stories found in Scripture lead us to ponder their meaning, so has Advent's bread story led me to several pastoral and theological reflections. First, and most obvious, a pastor should never pass up an opportunity to integrate biblical insights into everyday activities. A church garden is as good, if not better,

than the classroom in the education building to teach many of the biblical stories. While we have to reach back into history to explain the sheep-shepherd metaphor, we can experience the meaning of parables and words of guidance, wisdom, and hope by faithfully tending a garden. Ellen Davis builds a strong case for an agrarian reading of the Bible in her scholarly work, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*.*

My theological reflections pertaining to bread arise out of a Lutheran understanding of Christ's presence in bread and wine. I believe that Christ is present in, with, and under the bread and wine when God's word is joined to the external elements, but I wonder if we are doing ourselves a disservice by limiting Christ's presence to a few prepositions. Was Christ present when confirmation students took seed into their hands and cast it out into the darkness? Was Christ present when Kebeh taught us how to harvest and winnow the grain? Was Christ present in the wind separating the wheat from the chaff? Was Christ present as the wheat was ground into flour just as Christ was ground to death on a cross? Was Christ present as flour was mixed with yeast and began rising up to become the bread of life? Indeed, Christ promises to be present in the consecrated elements, but I contend that Christ is also present in the community of people gathered in his name from beginning to end of this bread-making process. Christ's presence in, with, and under the consecrated elements does not mean Christ is absent from the bread-making process.

Consecrated bread is food for the soul because it nourishes and strengthens the new being in Christ. Nevertheless, food for the soul is also food from the soil. Without soil there is no daily bread and without daily bread we cannot have this food for the soul.

This leads us to a theological consideration. What do we make of the other thirteen loaves of bread that were on the altar the day of Advent's anniversary celebration? We teach that unless bread is accompanied by the word, it remains ordinary bread. This teaching remains intact for me, but we might want to think about what is meant by "ordinary" bread in this day and age of industrial agriculture. In my mind, ordinary bread is derived from the wheat sown by super-sized farm equipment on vast amounts of land in the breadbasket states, using genetically modified seed that is immune to weed-killing pesticides. Once harvested, the wheat is stored in a silo and sold as a commodity. The bread we purchase in the grocery store is baked in industrial-sized ovens and shipped hundreds of miles. True, not all industrial brands of bread are created equal; even so, if you can buy the same brand of bread on the West Coast as you do on the East Coast, it is ordinary bread.

*See Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

I haven't researched how bread was made back in the 1500s, but my guess is that the process of bread baking leading up to what Luther described as ordinary bread probably bears a closer resemblance to the bread served at the anniversary celebration than the bread that comes to us through the industrial process and is found in the bakery section of stores and restaurants today. What was ordinary in the 1500s became extraordinary in the twentieth century. True, it is not all about the bread. It is about the word and bread. Consecrated bread is food for the soul because it nourishes and strengthens the new being in Christ. Nevertheless, food for the soul is also food from the soil. Without soil there is no daily bread and without daily bread we cannot have this food for the soul.

Now, let us turn to the conclusion of the bread story on the fiftieth-anniversary celebration. The remaining thirteen loaves of bread were taken into the kitchen where they were sliced, placed in baskets, carried out, and set upon the round tables where people came to sit after going through the food line. The people on the anniversary committee decided not to prepare or cater a fancy meal with all the trimmings. Rather, a simple meal of soups, salad, and breads was served. The soup was made from the butternut squash grown in the children's garden. I noticed a couple of people dipping their slice of bread into their bowl of soup and lifting the soaked bread to their lips, and intinction came to mind. It appeared that the small parcel of bread served during worship and a slice of bread dipped and savored at the table were both received by a community of faithful disciples filled with gratitude and thanksgiving to the great bread-making and bread-breaking Lord of all. ☩

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