



Farm, Bakery, Table: Reflections on a Path of Daily Bread around the Globe

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With a generous fellowship from Luther Seminary, I set off last year for Japan, South Africa, and Armenia. The focus of my year abroad would be the relationship between faith and land, both how God cares for us through the land and how we are stewards of it. With that in mind, I sought ways to learn more about physical bread in order to gain insight into Jesus' frequent bread language. He identifies himself as the "Bread of Life" (John 6:48) and teaches us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). As I reflect here on a path of bread, moving from a farm in Japan, to a bakery in South Africa, to a table in Armenia, I suggest three important attributes of daily bread to deepen our understanding of its theological connections: labor, craft, and wholeness.

FARM: LABOR AND THE RICE HARVEST IN JAPAN

My wife Anna and I were volunteers at the Asian Rural Institute (ARI), a training center for rural leaders from developing countries founded by a Japanese pastor. Most of those in training were pastors themselves from a variety of

Participating in the production of our "daily bread"—whether rice in Japan, baguettes in South Africa, or lavash in Armenia—produces not only social and economic insights but theological ones as well. God provides for our physical needs, and Jesus, as the "bread of life," satisfies even more than the rumbling of our stomachs.

places—from Myanmar to Uganda. The focus of the program is training in organic agriculture and local resource management as well as servant leadership. ARI is a working farm: greenhouses, pigpens, acres of gardens, and rice paddies.

Rice is the daily bread of Japan, a bowl at every meal. To say growing rice requires some work is like saying that Karl Barth is a little light reading. Rice cultivation takes intensive labor: Plant the seedlings. Move earth to make a watertight paddy. Transplant thousands of seedlings by hand. Flood. Weed by hand. Avoid snakes. Drain the paddy. Harvest by hand or, if you're lucky, by combine. Tie bundles of rice. Hang over long bamboo racks. Wait to dry. All of this, by God's great mercy, produces an abundant yield of rice from the original seed.

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The labor of the harvest leads to a solemn realization. For the rice to feed us, it has to die. With a serrated sickle one rips through the straw and separates the rice from the soil that sustained it. This is not to be sentimental. Rice or any other staple must end its life to become daily bread. Harvest is the moment when we acknowledge the closeness of dying and living in God's creation. By necessity, death opens the way for life, a resonant narrative for those who place their faith in Christ crucified and risen.

Nevertheless, the rice harvest at ARI is an event for celebration, where there is rejoicing in God's provision but also sighing in relief that the last step of the work will soon be complete. The toil under the sun for this crop is finished (at least for this year). The celebration last fall was especially joyous because the paddies were healthy. Since much soil in the region had been contaminated by the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster not far to the east, we were happy to have a harvest at all.

During the rice harvest in Japan, it became clear that daily bread demands labor, physical movement, and strength utilized over a period of time. In this sense, our daily bread requires the relationship of our bodies to one another. My bread, the food that God provides to sustain me, is picked and carried and hurled onto a truck by someone else, by the muscles and bones of his or her body. In the loaf of bread or the bowl of rice there is another's sweat, exertion, and toil. In other words, there is another's body.

Perhaps this bodiliness of daily bread is closer than we want to admit. And yet it is central in the way that we know Christ. For what does he offer us? Out of love he ends up on the cross, his body given up to the point of death. "This is my body given for you," he says of the bread he offers his disciples.

BAKERY: CRAFT IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa we spent a month volunteering with a community and working farm that serves people with developmental disabilities and provides opportunities for meaningful work. Several workshops run on the farm, including a dairy, an herb garden, and a pasture management team. I was assigned to the bakery.

In size and output it was a commercial-style bakery and we were a rowdy little utopia. The head baker was a German ex-pat who, ironically, had a mid-grade allergy to flour and sneezed his way through the morning. My supervisor and teacher was a man from Ghana who hoped to start a similar community for people with disabilities in his home country. The rest of us, residents and volunteers, completed our tasks at a pace unknown to me in my limited at-home baking pursuits.

Amidst the violence, racial tension, and economic disparity of South Africa, our hands were blessed to be in the dough, crafting real food for the health of a community: seeded loaves, raisin bread, and the finicky baguette. A high wooden table communed us at the center of the bakery to shape dough for proofing and to reshape it for the oven.

In late morning, we arranged finished loaves on the outside porch to cool. This attracted a rag-tag troop of baboons that lived in the cliffs above the farm. Baboons hungry for bread: perhaps an illustrative (if unflattering) image of what it means to be church, leaving the comforts of home to come to the table at the aroma of the Bread of Life. “Have a smell,” we said to the waiting baboons near the cooling baguettes. “Take and eat. This is my body given for you,” beckons Jesus with all that he has to every sinner.

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Daily bread from the bakery is about craft: the human capacity to creatively change one thing into another. Craft implies our participation in God’s creation. We use what God has already made to make something new. In the bakery this is the bowl of dry ingredients that, with some know-how and manipulation, becomes a delicious, chewy slice of bread.

An important aspect of craft is knowing how to utilize waste. Between each round of shaping loaves, we would scrape the work surface to remove leftover bits of dough. These scraps did not go to the garbage but instead to a special bowl that would be full by morning’s end. These cherished leftovers would feed a sourdough starter full of microorganisms that helped the next day’s bread rise and enhanced its flavor. In God’s creation, something left over—what might be considered worthless—is actually life-giving. At moments like this in the bakery one has a sense of *creatio continua*, God’s continuing creative activity in our daily lives.

A second key element of craft is knowing how to manage your resources. The most costly ingredient for this bakery is the fuel to heat the ovens. This again changed my view of daily bread. I assumed bread was primarily the raw materials of sustenance, the grain itself, God's gift from the ground. In South Africa, our ovens were heated with natural gas. Elsewhere, firewood is the preferred method of fuel. In any case, the craft of creating bread necessitates an even wider circle of God's provision: natural gas from the earth and firewood from the soil.

Because crafting daily bread is also about fuel, it is all the more crucial that we consider the ethics of our energy use. Very often, discussions of fuel and energy are about solving a gridlock of problems, debating climate change, or criticizing another's automobile. Rarely do we consider that fuel is a necessary part of the daily bread that God provides; thus it, too, is a gift. And when experienced as gift, it can be cherished instead of exploited.

TABLE: WHOLENESS IN ARMENIA

"Lavash is life." Armenians will tell you this not long after they share their primary motto: "Guests are gifts from God," a policy that they live out whenever possible. Lavash, unleavened dough rolled into thin sheets and slapped to the walls of a blazing hot underground oven to bake, is the staple food of Armenia. This daily bread emerges after a full day's labor, and its craft has been passed down through generations. In some countries, bread is an accompaniment to the meal. In Armenia, bread is the center, the rest a supplement of apricot jam, homemade cheese, or grilled meat.

Lavash is water, flour, salt, and nothing else. After a day, its edges become brittle and its center tough. This is the moment that an Armenian host does something special. Taking a water bottle with several small holes punched in the cap, she (in Armenia women handle the bread) gives a flick of the wrist to scatter droplets of water over the lavash. The moisture gives the bread new life and wholeness as if fresh from the oven.

I could not help seeing in this an element of liturgical practice, the sprinkling of the congregation with water (the rite known as "asperges"). In the Lutheran tradition this might be done at the Easter Vigil and the water sprinkled on the congregation with a pine branch. In the liturgical context, the water is a reminder of baptism and the movement from death into life, both Jesus' and our own. The Armenian bread undergoes a similar movement: from stale to life-giving with the sprinkling of a few drops. There is a lesson to be learned here. The response to baptism is not to bask in the cool water but rather to soak it up so that one might be full of life—to move from being stale to being bread for the neighbor.

At the Armenian table, bread signifies more than physical sustenance. Lavash suggests wholeness and the joy of relationship in a country that has experienced great loss. Armenia was once an epicenter of Christendom, the first country to adopt the faith in the year 301 A.D. While the church today is experiencing resur-

gence, recent history has not been kind. Over a million lives were lost and families fractured by the Armenian Genocide of the early twentieth century. What's more, the end of communism took jobs with it, and now many young people leave family to find work in Russia and elsewhere.

The stacks of bread at the center of the Armenian table challenge such narratives of scarcity. Bread is celebrated because it is a reminder of God's continuing faithfulness in the midst of tragedy and the memory of loss. In the face of poverty, Armenians share lavash with joy and without reservation. Eating bread with family is a sign of God's blessing, of wholeness and communion. Abundant sheets of lavash usher new guests into this blessing as well. To be a guest at such a table is to experience health, renewal, and God's provision of a home far away from one's homeland.

BREAD FROM THE EARTH, BREAD FROM HEAVEN

Physical daily bread is essential for the world. Bread takes work and creativity to feed those who hunger. Jesus feeds five thousand with only five loaves, longing that those who hunger might be filled (see Mark 8). Yet even an abundant rice harvest, or a bakery running full-tilt, or heaps of lavash cannot provide all that is needed for life. "I am the Bread of Life," Jesus says, insisting we have a need beyond the rumbling of our stomachs. This tension is at the heart of the Christian faith. With faith-filled hearts and satisfied souls from the Bread of Life, we can then labor over our physical bread, crafting it carefully, and hoping it will bring wholeness. Though we may not always know how it will come to us, we pray as Jesus taught, "Give us today our daily bread." ⊕

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