



The Bread of Life

BRYCE JOHNSON

Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated... as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up... they filled twelve baskets.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

—John 6:11–13, 35

What if a congregation took seriously Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life," and made this their core identity and mission? Regularly, we break bread at a communal meal, open to all, where we remember God's abundant love. Yet, for many in the faith community where I serve, as well as the wider community where I live, there are gnawing hungers: for time to feed the soul, to connect more deeply with others, and to contribute something of substance to the world. The congregation I serve is striving to embody the presence of Jesus by becoming living bread in our community. The most visible sign of this is an outdoor community bread oven adjacent to the church building. Inscribed on a large stone above the hearth door of the oven are the words "Bread of Life."

The idea for a community oven grew out of my 2009 sabbatical that was funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. When I was asked in the application, "What will make your heart sing?" the answer was easy. For years, making bread has been a

A community bread oven can be a way to gather members of a congregation and the broader community. In the oven, people bake the "bread of life"—both for their own use and the Eucharist—and they become the body of Christ in a new way.

practice that nourishes my body and soul. It is the combination of earthiness and simplicity that is so satisfying: the feel of sticky dough with its sweet earthy scent, the slow rising, punching down, and rising again, the aroma of baking bread, and the joy of sharing with others a loaf fresh from the oven.

COMMUNAL OVENS

My sabbatical proposal was to study with artisan bread makers in Italy and France and research ancient European community bread ovens. European communal ovens date back to the twelfth century. To call these ancient ovens communal is not quite accurate, for they did not belong to the community. The production of food was controlled by the local Lord, oftentimes the Church.¹ People did not have home ovens; the communal oven was the only one in town, and a fee was charged to bake in it. Likewise, farmers paid a fee to use the community mill for their grain.

In post-revolution France, the ovens became the property of the municipality. No fees were charged. Once a week, the community oven, which was located in the center of the village, was heated and villagers brought their homemade bread dough for baking. These were large ovens capable of baking fifty to sixty loaves of bread at a time. There was often a large water trough adjacent to the oven for washing clothes. As clothes were washed and people waited for the bread to bake, news was shared, politics debated, and community was built.

Many early French communal ovens included a foyer at the front of the oven consisting of a pitched roof, and counters around its walls for baskets and bread and a stone water jug. The parts of the oven and its house took their names from church architecture: the building was called “the chapel,” the outer hearth “the altar,” and the water jug “the font.”² The oven was a place of reverence where the community gathered and paused to offer the work of their hands to the fire of the oven and return home with nourishing gifts.

Were any of the attributes of these ancient ovens transferable to a twenty-first-century American suburban church? As I began to reflect on this and then speak of communal ovens at church, the concept found resonance with a good number of parishioners.

In the summer of 2010, forty volunteers spent three months constructing the oven: pouring cement, mixing mortar, setting brick, constructing walls and a chimney, and applying stone to the exterior. Though not as large as the European ovens, the Community Oven at White Bear Lake United Methodist Church is six feet wide, eight feet deep, and ten feet high. Today the oven is used at least twice a month to build connection through community bread bakes and pizza events.

¹Daniel Wing and Alan Scott, *The Bread Builders: Hearth Loaves and Masonry Ovens* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 1999) 115.

²*Ibid.*, 116.

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

In the past year, the church I serve has cast a new vision: “Providing nourishment for the hungers of life.” One of our deepest hungers is for spiritual renewal. In the three Synoptic Gospels the feeding of the five thousand is preceded by a time of retreat. Matthew tells us Jesus went away “to a lonely place” (14:13 RSV). In Mark and Luke, Jesus invites the disciples, who have been out in the mission field, to withdraw with him (Mark 6:32, Luke 9:10). Engagement and withdrawal, doing and being—Jesus understood and practiced this. It is a practice that fosters the fullness of life.

Our congregation has developed a set of guiding principles for our work, one of which is “Life has a God-given rhythm: work and rest, exertion and renewal; we, like bread, develop most fully when that rhythm is honored.” We are a busy, program-based suburban congregation, and admittedly still learning this rhythm.

Bread making, especially when the bread is baked in a brick oven, helps us practice a different way of being. The night before the oven is to be used, a fire builder loads wood into the hearth and sets it aflame. The baking hearth is also the fire chamber. Heat from the wood is absorbed into the firebrick that lines the hearth. An hour before baking, the remaining coals and ash are removed, and the hearth floor is swabbed out with a mop. The heat absorbed by the bricks radiates back into the hearth to bake the bread.

In this hurry-up world we like action. We like to make things happen, but bread making is equal parts activity and patience. The same could be said for the work of the kingdom.

Through bread classes and retreats, we teach the slow art of making bread. In fact, many of the breads we teach require 18–24 hours to fully develop. A soupy mixture of flour, water, and yeast (called a pre-ferment) is made the day before. The remaining ingredients are added four hours before bake time and an age-old pattern is followed: mixing and kneading, rising, shaping, rising again, then baking. We are fortunate to have a former baker, who was not connected with the church, partner with us in teaching bread making. Ross Safford had been trained as a chef and earlier in his career had worked in Vermont with one of the most influential bakers in America. Today he works with the University of Minnesota Extension Department to improve the diets of low-income Minnesotans, and his expertise has helped us create healthier breads.

In this hurry-up world we like action. We like to make things happen, but bread making is equal parts activity and patience. You can add additional yeast and speed up the production of bread, but when dough develops slowly and is allowed to fully rise, it has more character and flavor. The same could be said for the work of the kingdom. As Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a woman mixes a little yeast into three big batches of flour. Finally, all the dough

rises” (Matt 13:33 CEV). Though often imperceptible, the kingdom of God is rising slowly within us and around us. A bread maker gets a sense of this through sight, smell, touch, and finally taste as the bread is completed in the fullness of time.

The concept of slow rise is reinforced in classes and retreats by reading and reflecting on poems and writings. Though he was probably not referring to bread, Jesuit priest and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin speaks to the rhythm of life when he writes,

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.... Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming in you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.³

CONNECTION

From two o'clock until four o'clock on the first Saturday of the month, the people of our neighborhood are invited to bring two loaves of bread to bake in the community oven. Bakers bring all kinds of bread: ciabatta, oatmeal, whole wheat, rye, Irish soda bread, and sourdough, and together they are loaded into the oven. The more the merrier! More bread means more moisture inside the oven. When fully loaded, a brick oven replicates a top commercial oven, producing bread with a moist crumb on the inside and a thin crisp crust on the outside.

Loaves bake for thirty to forty minutes. “Idle time,” some might say, but this is when connections happen. People from the larger community intermingle with our faith community. One man recently confided, “Baking bread here is the bonus. I really come to connect with people in a way that doesn't happen the rest of the week.” When the loaves are finished, most bakers set one aside to bring home and slice up the second to share with others. The conversations continue as warm bread is sampled.

Before the community bake starts, a team of volunteers led by a church member bakes a load of ciabatta. These airy, flavorful loaves will be given to first-time visitors to our church on Sunday morning. It is also on the first Saturday that we bake the bread to be served for communion the following day, as we celebrate communion on the first Sunday of the month. One Saturday, a single father from the congregation brought his three children. “You are just in time to help shape the communion bread,” I said. The dough had been made earlier in the morning and was now ready to be shaped for baking. With a healthy dose of guidance and reminders not to lick your fingers, the children shaped the loaves into rounds and placed them into proofing baskets for the final rising. An hour later the loaves were baked in the oven.

³Cited in Michael Harter, ed., *Hearts of Fire: Praying with Jesuits* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1993) 102–103.

The next morning I took the bread, blessed, and broke it. The associate pastor consecrated the cup. Then, before serving, I voiced thanks to Jim (not his real name) and his three children for helping prepare the bread. I looked to find Jim and his family. One of the children was beaming. There were tears in Jim's eyes. Something had broken open for them in the making and breaking of the bread. An awareness, perhaps, that they had had a hand in multiplying God's love. Like the boy who supplied the five loaves and two fish in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, Jim's family had been a part of drawing people together and connecting them with God.

SOMETHING OF SUBSTANCE

According to the Gospel of John, following the feeding of the five thousand the people wanted to make Jesus king (6:15)—the “Bread King,” if you will. Jesus had delivered to the multitude what King Herod could not: enough bread to satisfy their hunger. Lack of food was a dominant concern in Jesus' day. Interestingly, Bethlehem, the place of Jesus' birth, means “house of bread,” probably because the region around Bethlehem was known for its abundant grain fields. Bethlehem was the supplier of wheat and bread for Jerusalem. Sufficient grain was raised in Israel in Jesus' day, but people did not have access to enough grain or bread. Rome took 25 percent of the crop because there were more important mouths to feed elsewhere in the empire.⁴ When Jesus taught his disciples to pray “Give us this day our daily bread,” he reflected the reality of his day; for many there was no guarantee of bread each day.

Our congregation strives to be bread for our community in very concrete ways. We bake quantities of bread to be shared through local food distribution programs. Our brick-oven bread has been sold to raise funds for local food shelves. We have taught classes with the high school students from the local Alternative Learning Center, and the ciabatta or oatmeal bread or breadsticks they make are given away in the community.

One of our goals with the community oven is to bring together a more diverse population than that which regularly attends Sunday worship. Such an opportunity arose two years ago when we were contacted by Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis to help with their ten-week Culinary Skills program, which provides job training for the unemployed and homeless. We partner with them once a quarter. Eight to twelve students, diverse in race, age, and gender, come to the church where we teach bread making in our church kitchen and bake their loaves in the community oven. The students report it as one of the highlights of their training. Skills are learned and bonds are formed as bread is made. It is a highlight for our teachers and volunteers as well, who come away with a deep respect for the courage and resourcefulness of the students.

⁴H. E. Jacob, *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2007) 93.

At the close of each class, we break bread. It is Eucharist, but we minimize the liturgical language and focus on the meaning of Eucharist, which is thanksgiving. Before we partake of the bread and cup, we invite those gathered, if they are willing, to express a word of thanks. The students give thanks for the bread class and the chance to bake in the oven. Because this class comes near the end of their ten-week program, many express gratitude to the leaders from Catholic Charities for the opportunities and support they have received. Our volunteers have their own gratitude: “Today has been a gift” or “I have learned more from you than I think you have learned from us.” Finally, we break open a loaf we have made that day. A piece is torn and laid in the receiver’s hand, the cup passed, the bread dipped and eaten. Though brief, there is a sense that we are companions on the journey.

FEEDING THE 5,000—PIZZA

Most importantly, the community bread oven is about a new way of being the body of Christ. These are very challenging times for mainline Protestant churches. We see numbers declining, and the role and status of the church diminishing. The congregation I serve, though stable, has not escaped these trends.

For all of our focus on making and serving bread, we have learned that bread does not draw multitudes to the church the way it drew people to Jesus. It is challenging for people to make bread at home and transport it to the church (especially in winter) ready for baking. It requires time—something that is in short supply—and, of course, there are myriad ways to feed one’s hungers in this day and age; ours is just one unique option among many.

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The closest we have come to feeding 5,000 is during “Manitou Days,” a local festival held each June. On the first Saturday of Manitou Days, we partner with the Lutheran church next door. While they sponsor a huge community garage sale, we provide a free slice of pizza fresh from the community bread oven for lunch. Earlier this summer, we served up nearly 900 slices in two hours. That’s about 150 handmade pizzas. Our volunteers have become adept at making and baking pizza. A local pizza chain used to advertise the speed at which they baked their pizza: “90 seconds at 800 degrees.” Though we are not at their speed, we can do a pizza in three minutes at 700 degrees.

Recently I was reflecting on this with church leaders. I noted the skill of our volunteers and the satisfaction of seeing people stream to the bread oven for pizza. Then I added, “The oven has been a remarkable outreach tool for us, but for me

the goal has always been to draw the community together at the Lord's Table." Pondering my comment, one woman thoughtfully said, "For those who come for free pizza, perhaps the community oven *is* the Lord's Table." It gave me pause. If that is true, then how would we make and serve pizza as if it were a sacrament? For that matter, how do we go about nearly anything so that the work and the personal encounters are holy?

A man in the congregation I serve was born and raised a Catholic and was active in the Catholic Church until he joined our congregation a few years back. He recalls a favorite priest, who when he served the host, did not say, "The body of Christ given for you." Rather, he said, "You are the body of Christ." Gunnilla Norris echoes this sentiment when she writes, "Deep in our souls we know that *we* are the bread of life and that to become conscious of this and to live it makes all the difference."⁵ This is who we are trying to become. ⊕

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⁵Gunnilla Norris, *Becoming Bread* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2003) 4.