

Take This Bread
John 6:35, 41-51
August 9, 2009
Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

The title of my sermon this morning comes from a memoir of the same name, written by former journalist Sara Miles. The subtitle for her book is ‘The spiritual memoir of a 21st century Christian.’ⁱ It is, in many ways, similar to Anne Lamott’s memoir, *Traveling Mercies*. Both women write of being raised in atheistic households by parents who were themselves the children of missionaries. Prior to conversion, both women considered Christianity to be a religion of fundamentalist wackos peddling a belief system that no one with any true intelligence would ever buy into. And both women ultimately find themselves, against what they consider to be their very natures, falling in love with one man- the crucified one.

Sara’s journey, unlike Anne’s, did not dip into the troubled life of addiction, but rather traversed the back roads and villages of Central America during the revolutions and violence of the 1980’s; through the steaming kitchens of the New York City restaurant scene; and finally around and about the rolling hills and diverse neighborhoods of San Francisco.

It was in San Francisco that Sara Miles, taking a morning walk, found herself in an Episcopal Church. In her words: “I walked in, took a chair, and tried not to catch anyone’s eye... We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang, and it was all pretty peaceful and interesting... and then we gathered around the table. And there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying ‘the body of Christ,’ and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying ‘the blood of Christ,’ and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.”

In the days and weeks following Sara's first communion, she struggled to make sense of what had occurred. She thought that maybe she was hyper suggestible, and being surrounded by believers had been enough to push her, momentarily, into accepting their superstitions. But she could not shake the feeling, and that 'impossible word- Jesus-' lodged in her like a crumb. "I had no idea what it meant," she says, "I didn't know what to do with it. But it was realer than any thought of mine, or even any subjective emotion: It was as real as the actual taste of the bread and the wine. And the word was indisputably in my body now..."

Wheat and yeast and water, transformed by hands and heat, transformed again into something much more mysterious for Sara, as she grappled her way into a faith. In her words, "All that grounded me were those pieces of bread. I was feeling my way toward a theology, beginning with what I had taken in my mouth and working out from there... It was the materiality of Christianity that fascinated me, the compelling story of incarnation in its grungiest details, the promise that words and flesh [are] deeply, deeply connected."

The author of John's Gospel likewise appreciates the deep connectedness of words and flesh, and our passage for this morning, words about Jesus' identity, directly follows a story about the incarnate, fleshly reality of Jesus' ministry- the feeding of the five thousand.

Five thousand souls had followed Jesus into the hills around the Sea of Galilee, to hear what this one who healed the sick had to say for himself. Five thousand persons scattered on a hillside as the day wore on and the twilight gathered around them- their sides beginning to ache

in hunger. And Jesus transformed five barley loaves and two fish into enough food to satisfy everyone with twelve basketfuls left over. As the crowd munched on the toothsome bread and oily fish, they talked among themselves. Jesus, this healer and teacher and prophet, could feed them, too, they thought. He could be the one who, like Moses, provided manna in the wilderness. Food every day, enough to meet each one's need. And the crowd of no longer hungry people said to Jesus, "Sir, give us this bread always." For who would not want to follow the one who promises an end to our earthly hungers?

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"But Jesus tells them they are looking for him "not because [they] saw signs, but because [they] ate [their] fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes," he cautions them, "but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Jesus is clear in calling them to discern the difference between what fills the belly and what fills the soul. At the same time, he understands the ways that the hungers of the body and the hungers of the soul intertwine, and how both are at play when it comes to food."ⁱⁱ

"I am the bread of life," Jesus tells the people. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus, as the bread of life, satisfies our ultimate human need with his promise of eternal life. And the promise that no one will die is akin to the promise that no one will hunger or thirst again.ⁱⁱⁱ God desires that we eat the bread and receive God's teachings in Christ, knowing that what we need for life, life now and life eternal, is available in Jesus.

This is the Gospel writer's version of the Lord's Supper. Jesus is the bread of heaven, and it is through the communal act of breaking and sharing this bread that we receive him.

When we share in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, our participation places us, as believers, in relationship with Jesus, and we receive life through Jesus' abiding presence. Through the common symbols of bread and wine, Jesus declares that our most human longings are met in him. This is exactly what happened to Sara Miles. She participated in the act of eating the bread, and she came into relationship with Jesus, despite her sense that she lacked the proper requirements to receive what God had to offer. From a place of suspicion and hesitancy, even from a place of disbelief, Sara found herself on that Galilean hillside and was invited to share the feast. And she realized in that moment that the 'requirement for faith turned out not to be believing in a doctrine, or knowing how to behave in church, or being the right kind of person, or being raised correctly, or repeating the rituals properly. The requirement of faith seemed to be hunger and the willingness to be fed by something we do not yet understand.'

On summer Sundays and a few other times during the year, we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper by intinction. Intinction describes the way we tear off the bread and dip it into the chalice. Inevitably, some come forward and tear off a big hunk of bread, dip it lustily into the cup and walk away chewing, with a drip or two of juice hanging from their chin. And invariably, others come forward and tear off such a tiny morsel of bread that it is quite invisible to the naked eye- so tiny, in fact, that they have difficulty dipping it into the cup without wetting the tips of their fingertips in the process.

As I observe our common practice of taking and dipping bread, I wonder what drives us to take big or small pieces of bread. Are we concerned, like Sara Miles, that we don't meet the

requirements to receive what God provides? Or are we, perhaps, fearful of our own hunger and afraid to acknowledge that today, we could really use a lot of Jesus?

I remember sharing communion on a Gulf Coast beach many years ago. Standing in a circle of sun-burnt teenagers as a fiery sun set on the horizon, the pastor, in cut-off khaki shorts, a tie-dyed t-shirt and Birkenstocks, encouraged us to tear off big, hearty chunks of bread. God's grace is bountiful, she said; take as much as you need, she said. She passed around that loaf of bread, we dipped it in the cup of grape juice, and we ate. I do not remember the taste of the bread, but I do remember the lump in my throat as I tried to chew and swallow it. The lump felt like sadness, and it occurred to me that I was in the habit of taking small pieces, out of a sense of decorum or the embarrassment of my own hunger. I experienced the truth of Jesus as the bread of life as I struggled to eat that piece of bread. I realized the connection between the mundane act of chew and swallow with the extraordinary act of entering into relationship with Jesus Christ. Sometimes I still have this experience, on Sunday mornings, or even over my takeout salad, eaten at my desk. My throat tightens and I remember, as I chew, of the promise that God made with me, with each of us, to be present in all things, even and especially in the simple things of life like food.

The sacrament of breaking bread invites us to ingest and digest God. If we are what we eat, as the saying goes, then our participation in communion transforms us, and we are changed.

Perhaps part of our hesitance to eat and be filled has to do with the consequences of accepting Jesus as the bread of life. For when we ourselves eat the true bread of heaven, we consume the one who fed others and who set a feast to which everyone was invited. Having been

guests at Christ's table, we are obligated to go out and become hosts, creating our own tables of welcome, in Christ's name.

Following Sara Miles' conversion to Christianity, she embarked upon a wildly productive process of spiritual discernment. In the midst of her new life of great hunger and gratitude, Sara began to notice more carefully the disparity within her own community. She lived in a city of foodies, where specialty stores sold only exotic coffees or only virgin olive oils. And she lived in a city dotted with neighborhoods of deep poverty where the closest thing to a grocery store was the corner deli, selling Slim Jims, and soda and potato chips. When Sara received a letter in the mail from the San Francisco Food Bank, the proverbial light went on over her head. A food pantry "was communion, after all, but with free groceries instead of bread and wine... with the literal bread of life served from the same table as the bread of heaven."

She took the idea of feeding to its next logical conclusion- the open communion table where everyone is welcome ought also to be a table piled high with real food to feed hungry people. And so she approached the church's leadership, its pastors and its governing board. She withstood a firestorm of criticism about her plan to open a food pantry in the church. But with time, and a lot of convincing, the church opened its door unconditionally to all who showed up in need of food. And the gorgeous, \$7,000 communion table, carved in precious wood, became a kitchen table of sorts, around which fruits and vegetables and pasta and cereal and bread, were piled each Friday morning in ever-increasing size for those who would appear- drug addicts, prostitutes, ex-convicts, the homeless, the mentally ill, illegal immigrants, families and children. In short, those who showed up were Jesus' favorite dinner companions.

Sara and the church she now belonged to did not have an easy road ahead with the food pantry. As any of us know who are involved in the outreach ministries of church, things can get messy, and complicated, and disheartening. Too many people show up in need; not enough people show up to help; property is lost, stolen and destroyed; budgets shrink and costs soar; city and church policies and politics conflict. But as long as hunger persists in the bellies of others and hunger persists in the souls of believers, the work of reflecting the Christ we ingest and digest continues.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis describes the permanent consequences of accepting Jesus as the bread of life: “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you understand what God is doing. God is getting the drains right, and stopping the leaks in the roof... But presently God starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably, and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is God up to?... You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but God is building a palace. God intends to come and live in it.”^{iv}

When we break bread together, sharing the communal meal of Christ and with Christ, we invite God to take up residence within us, knocking around and tearing things up in order to create a version of the heavenly dwelling place inside of us. We can be assured, though, in the midst of this soul renovation, that God is looking out for us, providing the immediate and ultimate sustenance that only God’s life-giving gift in Jesus can offer.

God invites to take this bread, take as much as we need, as often as we need it. We do not have to ration the bread; we do not have to be worthy to receive it. We need only to be hungry, and there will be enough for all to eat and to be filled. Taste and see.

ⁱ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread, The Spiritual Memoir of a twenty-first-century Christian* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Jan Richardson, 'The Gastronomical Jesus, July 27, 2009,' <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gail R. O'Day, *John*, New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

^{iv} C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1952).