

The Church of the Transfiguration  
The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost  
John 6:35, 41-51

## Gathered Community

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I recently read somewhere that there are over 6,000 different kinds of bread throughout the world.

Now I don't know if that's really true – you can't always trust what you read nowadays – but it does seem like there are as many breads as there are cultures. Think about it. There's the Chinese bao, the Filipino pandesal, the French baguette, the German pretzel, Greek pita bread, Guyanese plait bread, Haitian pain haïtien, Indian naan, Irish soda bread, Italian focaccia, Mexican tortillas – the list goes on and on.

By the way, after the 8:30 am mass, someone came up to me and said, “Father, you forgot American Wonder Bread.” So, there's also American Wonder Bread. My bad!

But even though there are so many different kinds of bread, they all share something in common. They are all important ways in which people from around the world are nourished and fed.

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In today's gospel, Jesus says: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Many passages in the Bible talk about how bread satisfies our physical hunger – whether it's the manna that fed the Ancient Israelites in the wilderness (which we heard about in today's gospel reading), the baked bread that fed Elijah (which we heard about in today's Hebrew Bible reading), the five loaves of bread that fed a large crowd of five thousand people (which we heard about recently in another gospel reading), or the daily bread that we ask for in the Lord's Prayer.

But Jesus, as the “bread of life,” is not just about satisfying our physical hunger. Jesus also satisfies our *spiritual* hunger. In today's gospel, Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” (As you may recall, the people were very upset to hear Jesus make that claim.)

I suspect that many of you came to the Little Church Around the Corner because you've experienced some kind of spiritual hunger in your life. Maybe you've been searching for greater meaning in your life. Maybe you've been wrestling with the question of why suffering exists in the world, or why bad things happen to good people. Maybe you've been trying to figure out

what you are called to do here on this earth. Or maybe you've been looking for God's presence in the midst of a lonely world.

Now we know that Jesus, as the "bread of life," satisfies our spiritual hunger. But *how* exactly does Jesus satisfy our spiritual hunger? Well, just as there are many different kinds of bread in the world, there are many different ways in which we are fed by Jesus.

Some of us might be fed by Jesus as the Word of God in Holy Scripture. Others of us might be fed by Jesus as the Word that is preached during a sermon. Still others might be fed by the presence of Jesus in our prayers.

But, as a parish that is deeply rooted in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, we deeply value the fact that we are fed by Jesus in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. Whenever we gather to receive the Body and Blood of Christ through the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation, we are fed through the "living bread that came down from heaven." We receive nourishment at God's table – which in turn gives us the strength to go out into the world and to "love and serve the Lord."

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There is, however, one other way in which we are fed spiritually by Jesus: in gathered community.

The early church had a wonderful way of thinking about bread that has been forgotten by most Christians today. The early church saw the similarities between a loaf of bread and the worshipping community. Have any of you heard about this comparison? Most of you haven't, which is not surprising.

Well, let me explain. Just as a loaf of bread is made up of many individual grains of wheat gathered together, the church consists of many individuals gathered together into one Body. Just look around you. We are each individual grains of wheat that form the Body of Christ!

The *Didache*, an early Christian liturgical manual from the second century, contains a beautiful prayer that compares the eucharistic bread to the gathered community:

Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills [as grain], and was gathered together and became one, so let your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom.

The early church father St. John Chrysostom also preached in the fifth century about the connection between bread and gathered community. He said:

[J]ust as the bread, which consists of many grains, is made one – to the point that the separate grains are no longer visible (even though they are still there) – so we are joined to each other and to Christ. But if we are all nourished by the same source and become

one with him, why do we not also show forth the same love and become one in this respect too?

For St. John Chrysostom, we are called to love one another because, like the grains in a loaf of bread, we are joined to each other and to Christ.

We hear a similar message in today's epistle reading. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians urges us to "[p]ut away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger. . . . and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

So the early church had it right: It is in gathered community that we are also fed by Jesus.

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As we continue with today's mass, I invite you to look around at your fellow parishioners and reflect upon the words of our gospel hymn:

As grain on scattered hillsides,  
    when gathered makes one bread,  
God, gather all your people  
    as one in Christ our head.  
We come from many places,  
    and we are not the same,  
yet Your strong love has called us  
    to meet in Jesus' name.

Yes, the gospel hymn is about bread. But it is also about us, the gathered community. Look around and see how we are like many grains of wheat from different places and different lands. But despite our differences, we come together as a single loaf of bread.

And look around when you come up to the altar rail to receive the Holy Eucharist. Yes, you will be fed by Jesus through the bread and cup. But you will also be fed spiritually by the "bread of life" as represented by the gathered community around you.

*We* are the "bread of life" because *we* are the Body of Christ.

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Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."