

Bread of Life – Bread for the world

At this point in John's Gospel Passover - the central Jewish feast – is approaching; here we have Jesus is reinterpreting the story of the Passover and the Exodus through his own life and ministry. John's Gospel doesn't have a traditional "Last Supper" so these passages about Jesus being the "bread of life" and "the bread that came down from heaven" are especially important at this point in this Gospel.

The importance of bread in this portion of the Gospel of John and building on what we talked about last week – sacraments (outward & visible sign of inward & spiritual grace) got me thinking about bread, bread making and what these can point to; of what they can be signs.

I may be reaching a bit...I believe there are some life lessons to be learned from the making of bread.

Some of these lessons have to do with **TIME, BEING PREPARED**

1st step in making bread – read through the recipe and make sure you have on hand what you need in terms of ingredients and time. I've been known to start making bread and only realize that I don't have enough flour *after* I've starting adding the flour to the mix – which is past the point of no return! Life lesson: before starting a project think it through. Do you have what you need? Materials, time, skills, backup plans, support, etc.

When making bread, after combining the rising agent (usually yeast) and it's 'food' – some type of sugar, it is important to let the mixture sit. The yeast needs time to 'bloom' – to combine with its 'food' and start the rising process. If you don't let the mixture rest – your bread won't rise.

After the flour and other ingredients have been added the *dough* needs to rest.

One bread recipe includes this note: "Ignore this rest at your peril! Bread dough needs a Sabbath rest as much as its maker does."

Making bread teaches us/reminds us that some things can't be rushed. Sometimes things need the time they need.

Serving in churches for 20+ years, I've come to learn that usually things will take at least 3 times as long as I think they will; well frankly, things often take 10 times longer than expected....

Not just the work – the doing of things, which is understandable. After all, church 'work' is done by volunteers.

I've learned that the idea that things will take whatever time they need, applies to preparing people also. Whether it's preparing people for a change, or for something new, or starting a project...time spent on preparation is time well spent – and that time will be longer than you planned!

Life example: For many years I served a three church cluster. When I was called to that position there was no thought of having those 3 churches make any major changes. As time passed, it became clear that one of the three needed to make some very difficult decisions. At current levels of income and expenses, all endowments and 'extra' funds would be used up within 18 months and expenses continued to be higher than income.

Long story – short: the three churches each decided to explore the possibility of merging into one, new church.

As you can imagine this was a difficult decision and it took some time to reach this decision. There was a lot of prep time and we were clear that there wasn't any time line. Decisions would be made when we were ready to make them. (Although some people weren't too happy about this!)

Surprisingly, the process, for the most part went relatively smoothly. Yes, here were bumps and hard times but considering the magnitude of what was at first being considered and then being planned, the process went well.

With one very notable exception: Deciding where this community of one new church made up of what had been three churches – each with their own buildings, would worship.

In hindsight I think this was because at this point what had been something we were talking about and even planning for, became a reality.

Deciding where the one new church would worship was the hardest decision and by far, took the most time to decide. We had meeting after meeting, after meeting. We just couldn't come to a decision. None of the group wanted to make the hard decision to close 'their' church and sell the property. We tried every tactic that I could think of – all to no avail. Until finally one person spoke passionately and said the hard words: "I think we need to close all three churches, sell all three properties and rent worship space in a neutral location." (Which is what we did.)

Things take the time they need and we 'ignore this rest at our peril."

Other lessons learned from bread making have to do with **Control** and lack of control!

Learned: things **will** go wrong; things will be messy (flour will go flying, you'll need something from a cupboard and your hands will be covered with sticky dough).

Learned: life is messy and even with preparation and planning things may not go smoothly.

Also: details are important; pay attention.

Keep track of how many cups of flour you've added! Sounds simply enough but more times than I can tell you, I've been in the process of adding cups of flour – 1 cup, 2 cups...and my minds starts wandering and I suddenly realize I have no idea how many cups of flour I've added. And unlike with some ingredients in some recipes, once you've started adding flour to the dough, you can't take it out and start over.

Life lesson: listen to people, really listen. Pay attention to how things are said. Pay attention to what isn't being said.

In bread making some things that are important are not always in your control. I've learned through experience that for some reason, humidity can affect bread making and baking. If I try it very humid days, things just don't work right.

And sometimes the power will go off when the bread is in the oven! Nothing you can do about that. Some things are beyond our control.

Life lesson: We can't control what people will think or feel about things. We can't control or even predict people's reactions. Nor can we control their perceptions of things.

Life Example: While serving at a church a co-worker and I needed to introduce a new and to many a foreign, concept. We did do our preparation and planning. We had meetings – group and individual meetings; we offered books and videos on the subject; we brought in experts to talk with people. Some people had an initial, *emotional* response and nothing could or would change their minds. Facts didn't affect their response...We can't control everything...

Third area of life lessons learned from making bread have to do with **Help**:

Practice (while may not make perfect) does help. Usually things get easier the more you do them. Having a 'mentor' or some kind of guide (a recipe!) is extremely helpful.

Life lesson: When possible, call upon the experience and knowledge of others; it can save a lot of time and aggravation. You'll learn more and probably quicker.

Life Example: When I first began serving in a cluster ministry I served with another priest who had been working with church clusters for 10+ years. He was very experienced and very well respected throughout the Diocese and beyond. He guided me, taught me, coached me; he connected me with others with whom I could talk; and he suggested conferences for me to attend. I learned a lot more than I would have without him and much more quickly.

Some misc. lessons:

-With time and experience you may be able to branch out, to experiment, to do things differently – like adding some ingredients and deleting others.

-Sometimes it's best to stop and walk away (rather than to keep banging your head against the wall). Yes – persistence is important, as is not giving up. And there is some wisdom in knowing that sometimes, for whatever reason, today is not the day to do this and to come back to it another time.

And finally – sometimes things go better than you expect!

Whoever thought making bread could teach so much about life?

Well for one, Barbara Cawthorne Grafton – Episcopal priest, author, farmer and bread maker. In her "Geranium Farm Cookbook" she says this about bread:

"The living yeast fascinates me...Crumble it into a cup of warm water and stir a little: within minutes, it has begun to breathe, to swell, to soften and come to life in its medium of warm water.

Little plant spores, that's what yeast is: waiting in their package until you come along with the warmth and water and remind it that it's alive.

Mixed with flour, it begins to feed on it as well, growing and swelling still more, so that when you come back to the bowl in which you left it a couple of hours ago, it has become a gorgeous dome, rising right out of the bowl.

Punch it down...and the legacy of its swelling is everywhere in its texture: elastic, smooth, irresistible. And then form it into loaves and leave it alone and it swells again, even more this time, twice as fast. Nothing can stop it.

Except that's not all there is to it. In order for there to be bread, the yeast must die.

In every place where microscopic yeast spore balloons to many times its own size there will be a pocket of air, left there by its death. A yeast-shaped hole. A bread oven is hot...the yeast spores do not survive in it. They give their lives for the bread...Their bodies give it the power to rise."

Can you hear the inspiration for her words?

"This is my body, given for you."

"I am the bread of life"

"This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Amen.