



First United Church of Oak Park

What Is It?

John 6:24-35

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

August 5, 2018

What is it?

The Israelites are completely bewildered when they wake up one morning and find crumbly white stuff all over the desert floor. They have no idea what it is, and they turn to Moses and say, in Hebrew, “Manna? Manna?” For the next 40 years, so the story goes, they are sustained by the “manna,” the “what is it” that blankets the desert floor almost every day.

What is it? Very recently a group of archaeologists discovered blackened crumbs around a hearth they were excavating in Jordan. Upon closer scientific examination, they discovered that the blackened crumbs were bread, and they are over 14,000 years old. That find stunned the people who pay attention to this sort of thing, because it completely redefines our understanding of the history of bread. Until they found these crumbs, scientists and historians had assumed that bread baking began about 10,000 years ago, after people began to farm; but this finding pushes back the start date of bread baking an additional 4,000 years. Now scientists suspect that bread-baking began even before people learned to farm.¹

What is it? I realize that for those of you who are gluten-intolerant, a loaf of bread is not a happy symbol; it is, instead, a symbol of what makes you sick. But, for the hunter-gatherers and early farmers who lived in places like Jordan and Palestine, Iraq and Iran, this bread was nothing short of a miracle.

Grain is a food that is not biologically designed for human consumption. Instead, it is user-friendly for animals like cows, goats, giraffes, and sheep – ruminants. These animals have digestive tracts that are particularly well suited to digesting grains and other plant life, so all they need is for the plants to grow, and they can graze it and be fed.

Not us. We are not built to process grain in the same way; we do not have the same bacteria in our guts, and we do not have as many stomachs. What is it, cows have four? To benefit from the rich proteins, vitamins, and minerals that are found in grains like wheat, rye, and barley, we human beings can’t just eat it from the ground; we need to separate the grains from the chaff, and then process those grains in a way that makes them more digestible.

One way to do that is to ferment them in liquid and make beer. The food historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto says that it’s unclear why human beings first cultivated grains. Was it for beer, or was it for bread? The jury is apparently out on that one, and there are some small, remote ivory towers in which this is still debated. Fernandez-Armesto, though, says that the success of wheat suggests that bread was the more important product.²

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/07/24/631583427/14-000-year-old-piece-of-bread-rewrites-the-history-of-baking-and-farming>

² Felipe Fernandez-Armesto. *Near a Thousand Tables: A History of Food* (New York: Free Press, 2004 [2002]), 94-97.

What is it? Most bread that holds together in a nice, big, firm or fluffy loaf, like this one, has wheat in it. Maybe it also has other grains, but it almost certainly has wheat. Why? Because wheat has gluten, and gluten is the hidden ingredient that makes bread come together.

Paul Hollywood talks a lot about gluten on *The Great British Baking Show*, to which I am personally addicted. The bread episodes are some of my favorites. I love watching those cooks slam their bread dough down on the counter or get their hands into it. They whack it and mush it and work it, so that the gluten inside the bread can connect and stretch. The bakers know the gluten is getting all connected when they can hold it up to the light, and stretch it thin, and see through it. Break baking is all about the gluten – the hidden ingredient, most abundantly found in wheat, that makes bread hold together. Gluten comes alive in the process of bread making; it is what forms webs of substance through the dough, creating microscopic networks that provide thickness and elasticity.³

The world-wide popularity of wheat as a food grain is very much linked to its bread-making properties. Lots of other things are linked to the bread-making properties of wheat, too: agriculture and the development of cities, just to name a few. With something like bread, you can transform wheat into something that feeds a lot of people.

What is it? It is transformation. It is a web of connectedness. It is elasticity and flexibility (at least before it's baked). It is nourishment. In our text this morning, Jesus says he is bread. And, in the meal we will celebrate in a few minutes, we will eat this bread as a symbol of his body. "I am the bread of life," says Jesus.

A couple of months ago I was rereading a book about how to understand and appreciate congregational cultures and, as I read, I began to think about some of the worship services we have here, which some of us find particularly powerful.⁴ Two of these services came to mind especially, and both are communion services.

The first service I thought about is our service on Maundy Thursday, three days before Easter. We have dinner together downstairs and we have communion together, too, in a very casual setting. Then the service becomes more somber as we walk through the tunnels and come into the darkened sanctuary to remember Jesus' trial and crucifixion. This is a service in which we rehearse and remember and retell the gospel story physically. We eat. We walk. We sing. We experience the darkness. We put our pieces of silver into a metal bowl that clangs with each coin that is dropped into it. The story comes alive as we embody the narrative together.

Something different comes alive in the second communion service I thought about when I read this book, and that is the service we conduct on the first Sunday in November, our All Saints service. This is also a communion service but, more profoundly, it is a time when together we hear a sung requiem and we take time to remember the good, beloved people who have filled our lives with grace, and who have died.

It was an incredible privilege to share that service with you last year as, one by one, many of you came forward, named loved ones, and lit candles. The room reverberated with memory and gratitude and grace; and the power of community came alive. I felt surrounded not only by those of you who were present, but also by

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gluten>

⁴ Denham Grierson. *Transforming a People of God* (New Zealand: Joint Board of Christian Education). I see on amazon.com that you can get a first edition of this book for \$233. It's a great book, but not that great. Borrow it from a library if you are interested!

the larger community of faith and love, which makes this specific community possible. In that context - in that context of family and community and love remembered - we shared the meal, Christ's body broken and Christ's blood shed for us.

"I am the bread of life," says Jesus.

I am the stories that you tell to one another.

I am the narratives you rehearse and embody.

"I am the bread of life."

I am the music you make with each other.

I am your harmony and counterpoint.

"I am the bread of life."

I am the love you share with each other.

I am the bonds of community.

I'm the elasticity that allows you to grow and stretch and bend.

"I am the bread of life."

I'm the invisible web that weaves you together.

I am trust.

"I am the bread of life."

I am God-with-you.

Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.

Whoever believes in me will never thirst."

Let us pray. Good and giving God, we are hungry for the bread you offer. Meet us in our hunger, we pray. Heal us from any immunities or intolerance that prevent us from enjoying the nourishment you offer. Forgive us our sins. Restore us to the vulnerability that allows us to trust and depend upon you. Remind us that you, bread-making, bread-sharing, life-giving God, offer us what we need as we walk our journeys of faith.

Bless this community with your presence and sustenance. We pray that with mercy and transforming grace, you will now receive the gifts we offer you. By your goodness, may our gifts be like yeast in a loaf; may they multiply. May our gifts be like gluten, may they build webs of healthy community. With these gifts and by your mercy, may those who need you most be fed, and housed, and befriended by your peace, in the name of Christ our Lord, the bread of life. Amen.